新約 とある魔術の禁書目録⑫

上条当麻は、全世界からオティヌスを守った。『魔神』の力を失った彼女は、小さな妖精さんとなり上条家の居候となる。そう、上条は『日常』を取り戻したのだ。

しかし。新たな脅威は、すぐに来た。

――『魔神』が動くぞ。

――サンジェルマン。それが全てを手に入れる者の名だ。

学園都市の巨大複合商業ビルにて、上条とサンジェルマンは、相まみえる。

そんな最悪の状況に巻き込まれたのは、買い物中の『アイテム』の面々、浜面仕上、そして学園都市第六位の超能力者・藍花悦――の紛い物。

激突が、始まる。

か-12-55

新約 とある魔術の禁書目録⑫

鎌池和馬

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鎌池和馬

もうここのスペースにコメント書くのも結構な回数だと思うのですが、さて秘訣はと考えると何一つ浮かんでこず……。うーん、やはり目的意識を持たないと人って何も得られないのかもしれません。

【電撃文庫作品】

とある魔術の禁書目録①～㉒
とある魔術の禁書目録SS①②
新約 とある魔術の禁書目録①～⑫
ヘヴィーオブジェクト シリーズ計八冊
インテリビレッジの座敷童①～⑤
簡単なアンケートです
簡単なモニターです
ヴァルトラウテさんの婚活事情
未踏召喚：// ブラッドサイン①②
とある魔術のヘヴィーな座敷童が簡単な殺人妃の婚活事情

イラスト：はいむらきよたか

広島の片田舎で、もそもそ絵を描いております。

新約

とある魔術の禁書目録インデックス 12

鎌池和馬
イラスト／はいむらきよたか

「……まったく、早くあの子を助ける道筋を作らなくちゃならないのに、変なのに巻き込まれて逃げ回る羽目になっちゃったし」

学園都市第六位の超能力者（レベル5）――と名乗るもの

藍花 悦（あいはな・えつ）

「……、あの子？　逃げ回る？」

学園都市の無能力（レベル0）の学生

上条当麻（かみじょう・とうま）

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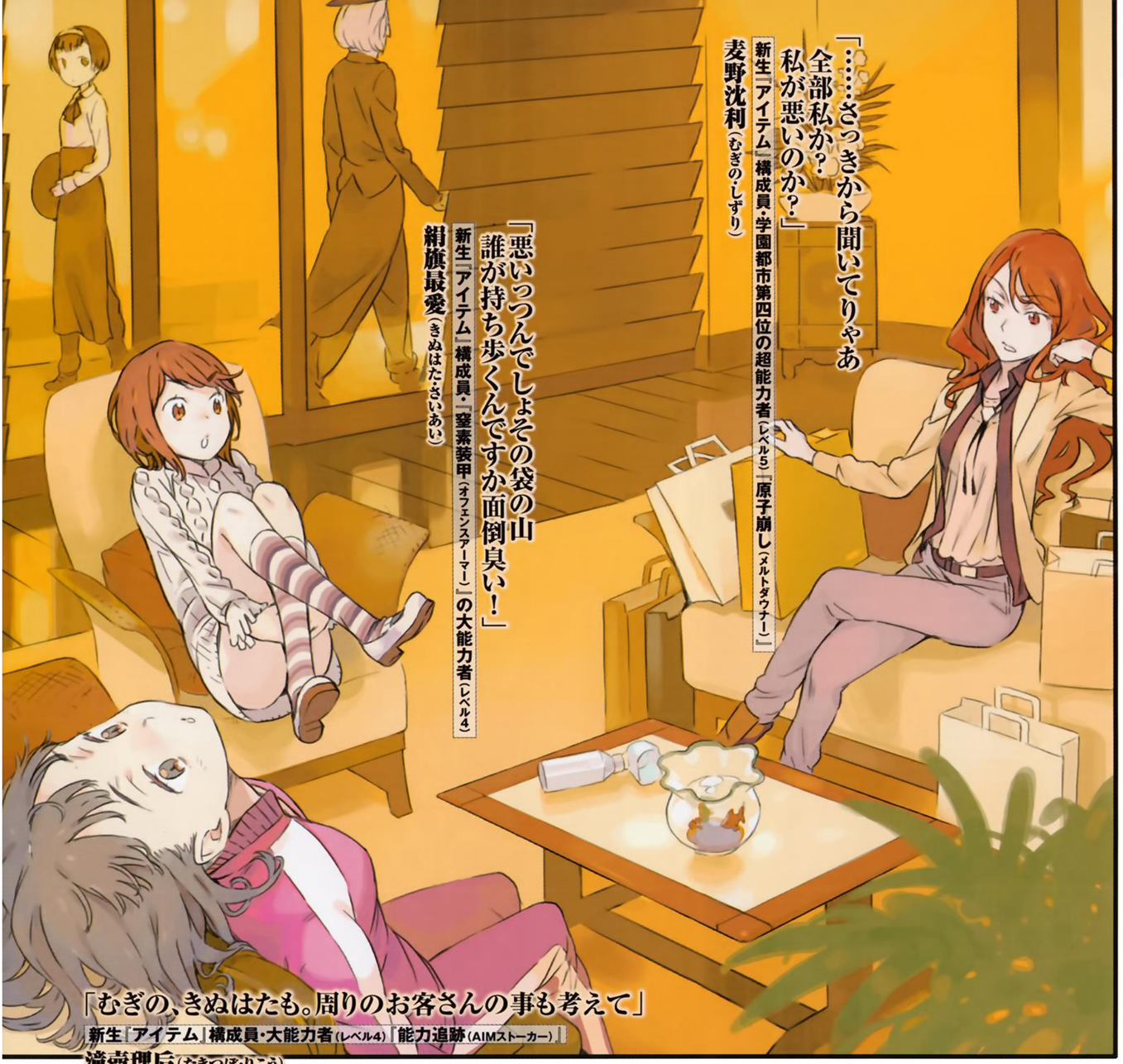
Foreign_GODs,or_Evil_KINGs.
to_the_DIANOID.
St.Germain,and_LIAR.
Hard_MEMORY.
Hand_Made_ROUTE.
CRAZY_1st_cry.

「納得が……いかん……」

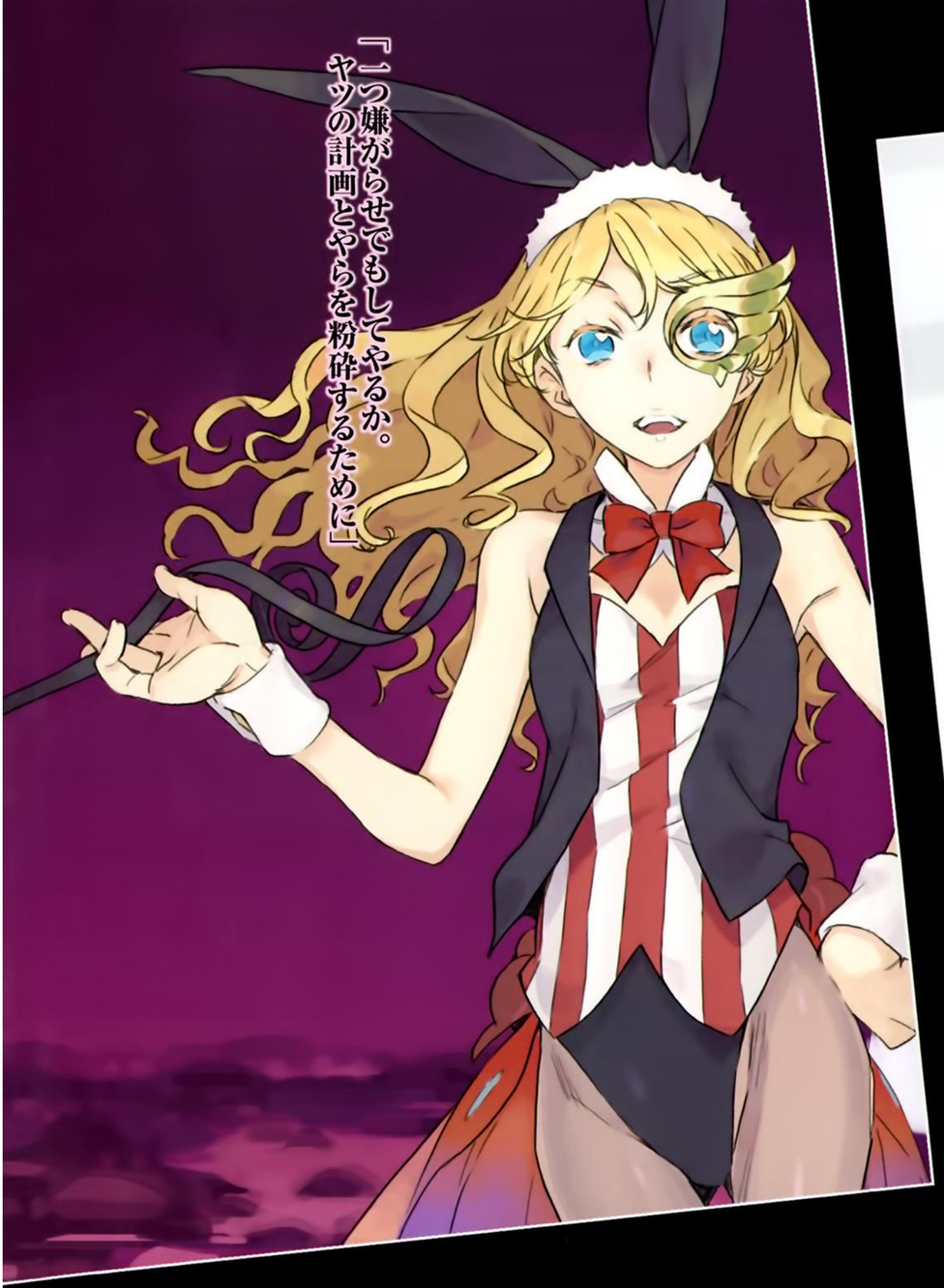
かつて魔術サイド最強の存在『魔神』だった妖精さん

オティヌス

Designed by **H**irokazu **W**atanabe(2725 Inc.)


「……さっきから聞いてりゃあ
全部私か？
私が悪いのか？」
新生『アイテム』構成員・学園都市第四位の超能力者（レベル5）『原子崩し（メルトダウナー）』
麦野沈利（むぎの・しずり）
「悪いっつんでしょその袋の山
誰が持ち歩くんですか面倒臭い！」
新生『アイテム』構成員・『窒素装甲（オフェンスアーマー）』の大能力者（レベル4）
絹旗最愛（きぬはた・さいあい）
「むぎの、きぬはたも。周りのお客さんの事も考えて」
新生『アイテム』構成員・大能力者（レベル4）『能力追跡（AIMストーカー）』
滝壺理后（だきつぼ・りこう）

「はい？」
元『アイテム』構成員・ただの無能力者（レベル0）
浜面仕上（はまづら・しあげ）
「浜面、クリスマスムード一色の
第二五学区に興味あります？」
元・超一流の殺し屋。現在は警備員（アンチスキル）として治安維持を担う
ステファニー＝ゴージャスパレス


「一つ嫌がらせでもしてやるか。
ヤツの計画とやらを粉砕するために」

「アレは、ある意味において『オティヌス』よりも
面倒な引っ掻き回し役となるじゃろう」
「本題も良いけれど、今にアレが動き出すわよ」
「んじゃま、そろそろわたし達の方も始めますかー」

Prologue: Limit of the World's Allowance — Foreign_GODs,or_Evil_KINGs.

Darkness covered the entire area.

Not only could one not see an inch in front of their face, but the darkness seemed to pass through their eyeballs and bear down on their mind.

However, the people drifting through that darkness showed no concern. They implicitly said that this was the natural state of the world or that someone had yet to whisper "let there be light".

Direction and depth were indistinguishable in that black space, but three distinct presences existed there.

"So have we managed to finish in time, Nephthys?"

An old man's voice spoke in the darkness. More than simply "wrinkled", the voice was better described as "dried-up".

The responding voice sounded like a young and bewitching beauty.

"Yes. That zombie girl is useful at times like this. Thanks to her background of actively drawing in a great number of cultures, she has an affinity for most anything."

"But, High Priest," cut in a girl's voice that sounded even younger and also childish. "Miss Zombie's theory is essentially the same as holding up opposing mirrors, right? By splitting up our power infinitely, we can intentionally weaken ourselves and avoid destroying the world whenever we move an arm or leg."

"What about it, Niang-Niang?"

"I'm just wondering if the symbol ∞ will really grow weaker when you split it up. I don't want to smash the world up like stained glass the first step I take. *We're not like Othinus*."

"It doesn't matter if it's a mere deception as long as it works. Just like a Moebius strip or a Klein bottle, some concepts are allowed to exist even if they can't be properly defined, Niang-Niang."

"Yeah, but I prefer practical ideas over theories. You could say I'm the inventor type instead of the scientist type. I have a hard time believing it'll actually work just because the theories all add up. I can't rest easy until I try it out for myself and see that it works."

"Then how about we try it?"

"Are you sure we should turn the world into our toy so casually?"

Despite her comment, the girl called Niang-Niang giggled and showed no real sign of hesitation.

The three presences intentionally all looked in the same direction.

That produced directionality in the all-encompassing and heavy darkness.

That directionality took the form of depth and finally defined the entire space.

The woman called Nephthys sang in a sweet voice that seemed to enchant the brain of all who heard it.

“Hello, world.”

A heavy metallic crash burst out.

“Hello, science side.”

A vertical line of thin, thin white light appeared in the surface of darkness.

“Hello, Academy City.”

Double-doors opened.

The three Magic Gods filled their lungs with the air of Academy City.

Academy City did not border the ocean, so the air routes and land routes were crucial. District 11 was a base for the latter. Metal containers were piled up like a mountain there and the Magic Gods took a casual step out from the box at the peak.

One was the High Priest.

His body was as skinny and covered in wrinkles as the dried branches of an ancient tree. He wore a purple Buddhist priest’s robe that covered that skinny frame and gave him a more voluminous outline. Great greed could be sensed in the sword he pressed to the ground like a staff and the glittering gold rakusu worn over his robe. He was the product of Buddhist self-mummification, where one starved themselves so their human form would transcend the six paths and become a Buddha in just one generation.

Another was Niang-Niang.

The girl wore a short white China dress with extremely baggy sleeves, but her utterly pale complexion was even whiter than her clothes. She wore a hat and had a unique charm attached to her forehead. Simply put, she was a Shijie-Xian of ancient China.

The last was Nephthys.

She was a beautiful woman with long silver hair whose chocolate-colored nude body was completely covered by white bandages. Her eye color changed at a whim and she had teardrop tattoos below her eyelids. She was the goddess said in Egyptian mythology to have shed large tears upon the death of Osiris, but strangely enough, no other stories were known about her. For that reason, some speculated her divinity had been built up by human hands based on the “crying woman” hired to attend funerals.

“For now…”

The High Priest spoke with his physical voice while moving fingers that looked like they would break off if he so much as bent them and shaking his head that looked like human skin pasted to a skull.

“It would seem to have worked. There is no sign of a tornado occurring on the other side of the world as with the butterfly effect or a holistic esper.”

“*Then I guess it’s about time for us to get started, too.*”

Niang-Niang's carefree comment elicited an exasperated warning from Nephthys whose entire body was bound by bandages.

"Dealing with the primary issue is fine, but *that* is going to be taking action soon. Now that we're existing here in the real world, we'll be detected before long."

"Yeah, we probably do need to do keep things in check. In a way, *that* is even more of a troublemaker than Othinus."

"What a pain," said the High Priest while massaging his shoulders.

Niang-Niang pouted her lips as she continued.

"Honestly, why did Aleister have to thoughtlessly destroy our hidden world? Maybe we really should've killed him."

"We are not like Othinus," replied the High Priest. "You yourself said so, Niang-Niang. Not that we can shamelessly call ourselves harmless."

His gentle and soothing voice led Niang-Niang to raise both hands.

But she was not saying she had been persuaded by his virtuous sermon.

"*Don't act so high and mighty, old man. You're the one that got pissed and tried to kill him first.*"

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"That's the problem right there. You completely rewrite your definition of what's right based on how you feel at the moment. What could be more dangerous than a god that makes a complete 180 between what he said five seconds ago and what he says five seconds later? The worst part is that you're not even aware of it, so you really do believe it's all connected by a continuous thread of logic."

"Anyway."

Rather than dodging the issue, the High Priest *truly did change the subject completely naturally*.

"We have lost our hidden world, so we have no choice but to stand on the game board here in the real world. Aleister, Gemstones, and Kamijou Touma. We have a lot of work to do. Or rather, a lot of unnecessary work has piled up. …But now that we are standing on this board, we cannot just passively watch on. Once our turn arrives, we will be forced to act. We can no longer stand still and entrust ourselves to the flow of time, so we need to pay some attention to where we stand."

"Yeah, yeah."

"This may be similar to experts working to hinder each other. Part of the blame lies in the fact that we are much too powerful to act as game pieces, but there is a possibility that each seemingly meaningless move will completely alter the situation on the board."

However, he did not say they should not move across the board.

He was not a man of such great character.

"So if at all possible, I would like to lend our help whenever someone is going to make a move, but will *that* be willing to accept that condition and abandon the role of troublemaker?"

As she listened, Nephthys placed a hand on her hip and looked down on the cityscape that stretched into the distance.

The mountain of containers at her feet was reminiscent of the *somehow nostalgic* graves of the pharaohs. That is, the pyramids.

Her captivating lips moved and formed words.

If she wanted, a Magic God could mold the world like clay and create a perfect paradise, so it was rare for the concept of an enemy to apply. Before even considering whether someone was strong or weak, the very categories of enemy and ally as well as the entire reason for fighting were kindly and coldly eliminated. It may have been that the only possible enemy for a Magic God was another Magic God. That other Magic God could join the struggle for the resource that was the one and only world to bend to one's will.

Nevertheless, Nephthys uttered a name and a related legend. Instead of grouping it in with the many others, she clearly singled it out.

"Queen Anne."

Now, what meaning would she attach to that?

The god continued speaking.

"So King Arthur had a twin sister and a shield to match his sword."

Chapter 1: Steamed Buns and Diamonds — to_the_DIANOID.

From the narrow back alley, only a small rectangle of the clear blue sky of winter was visible.

A short boy was sprawled out in a collection area piled high with garbage bags.

He only appeared to be about twelve. He had shoulder-length semi-long brown hair, a black hooded jacket, shorts, and boots. His socks and the innerwear visible within his jacket created a stark contrast. They left a strong impression with their bright sky-blue color and the lines drawn on with a highlighter.

His face could be described as childlike, so the bright swelling around his eyes and the blue bruises on his cheeks were all the more painful to see.

He let out a slow breath.

The boy recalled the conversation he had had not long before.

“You really shouldn’t get anywhere near *there*. It’s too reckless, even if you claim you need to rescue some missing friend called Frenda.”

He was certain his aching head was due to more than just being punched.

Those words had torn into his heart.

“I’m not trying to act tough and look down on you here. I really am trying to help because I feel sorry for you. You can tell the difference, can’t you?”

It had been a stereotypical city delinquent.

And not merely someone disguised as one; it truly had been one.

“I don’t know much about this city’s dark side and I’m not soaked in it either. That means I’m still on the honest side of the city. You can call it a gray zone, but I still just barely fit in that honest category. …But there are times when it’s more convenient to use people like that. Like now, for example.”

If someone from the underside of the city directly silenced someone, it would reveal that the underside was involved.

That was why that role fell to the “honest” people.

Of course, they made sure it was impossible to trace the job back to the dark side. Countless middlemen were used and the payment was made through some complex method.

“Listen, *wherever the money gathers* so does the dark side. They aren’t all your target, but a lot of them will grow to hate you even if all you do is try to search them out. That’s just how it works. You simply don’t have anywhere near enough power. Not only will you not even get close to your actual target, you’ll make five to ten times as many enemies in the process. …At this rate, you’ll get yourself killed. And I’m not saying that lightly like when a delinquent like me threatens to kill someone. I truly mean that you will end up dead. Do you get the difference?”

"…"

The boy sat up on the pile of trash.

He had been turned away at the gate. Ads played on TV for that massive complex, so anyone should have been able to freely enter and exit it. However, anyone entering with malicious intent would be searched out before they set foot on the premises and the interception team would head out.

Was there something there that required going that far?

Was there something hidden there that they could not let anyone see?

The boy wanted to know what had happened to his friend who had vanished into the dark side.

And he would make sure to rescue her, no matter how deep into the darkness he had to venture.

There was a secret worth crushing those desires. No, that required crushing them.

"But I'm sure you've heard about this."

The delinquent had given a heavy sigh while speaking to the boy.

"If your level of rarity isn't enough, then there's a way of disguising yourself as some well-known person. For example, Academy City's #6, Aihana Etsu. No one knows that Level 5's age or sex. …Which means anyone disguise dress up as them and no one can tell the real from the fake, right? No one knows what the original's like in the first place."

The boy could not slip past security.

He could not access the data.

But…

What if he was not himself? For example, an airport worker could slip past the gate without having his baggage checked and a police officer would not be stopped at a checkpoint. For the president, the White House was literally his home and an astronaut could take a nap in a space station no one else could hope to reach.

What if he did the same?

He had nothing and was turned away at the gate, but what if someone else would not be?

What if he had the title of Level 5, the greatest rarity of Academy City's students?

"You want to know why the person stopping you would tell you that?"

The delinquent had given a shrug that did not suit him at all.

"Because your story is just too sad. Stopping you here is the right thing to do, but it's human nature to want to tell you at least one little trick."

"…"

The short boy rubbed his red cheek with the back of his hand.

He sucked in the chilly air and let out a warm breath.

He quietly gathered his resolve while sitting on the pile of trash.

He would do it.

It did not matter how he did it, but he would become Aihana Etsu, Academy City's #6 Level 5.

XXXX

Morning came early to Kamijou Touma's dorm room of District 7.

After all, the pointy-haired boy was in high school and yet raised a pet cat and a girl. That prevented him from just throwing some food in the microwave or eating out because that was too much work. He had to cook for himself. Flavor could take the back seat because quantity was what mattered. He painstakingly worried over improving his cost performance and found himself saying things such as "Huh? Wouldn't ramen work better if I dared to stretch out the noodles? Yes, I do dare! N-now I just have to figure out the bare minimum before the flavor reaches lethal levels!" or "The core of a cabbage? You can eat that! You just have to slice it up in a juicer, throw in some milk, honey, and apple peels, and then hit the switch again!" He was always struggling to improve in what seemed more like a practical joke than cooking.

However, this morning began far too soon.

Index was asleep on the bed and Kamijou Touma was sleeping inside the locked bathroom's bathtub, looking like he was pretending to have entered cold sleep.

So the one who was up so early was the newcomer.

She was a fifteen centimeter Magic God.

The pale girl with long, wavy blond hair and an eye covered by an eyepatch was Othinus.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!???"

She was running as quickly as possible across the wooden floor as a hell beast approached from behind. The fluffy mewing creature was apparently a Japanese calico cat, but at Othinus's size, it was no different from a relative of Cerberus or Orthrus.

Ever since Othinus had arrived, the cat seemed to have viewed her as emergency food or a cat toy, so she had already stopped counting how often she had been attacked.

He growled and dropped his front right paw, so she dodged and then rolled out of the way of the stomp from the approaching left paw. Othinus was making her way to the bathroom.

Unfortunately, her fifteen centimeter height prevented her from reaching the doorknob which was almost a meter high.

Fortunately, that was not her target.

"Hnn!"

As if making a head slide in baseball, she stretched her arms forward in a crawling pose and threw herself toward the floor. The bathroom door had a two or three centimeter gap at the bottom and she slipped below it to slide inside.

At the same time, she heard a bang on the door behind her.

The cat had pounced but lost sight of its target and slammed head-first into the door.

The girl gasped for breath but finally stood up. She heard surprisingly pitiful meowing from behind the door, so she held her hands together, stomped her feet in annoyance, glanced toward the door, and finally crouched down to check through the gap at the bottom.

At that exact moment, a paw guillotine dropped down from above.

“Tch! I knew I shouldn’t have worried about you!!”

She frantically pulled her head back in and wholeheartedly cursed the animal.

“Nnnnn… Othinus, what’s with this hell of panties? You’re getting lazy with these new worlds now, aren’t you? Zzz…”

The sound of grinding teeth and a ridiculous comment came from the bathtub. They relaxed the thread of tension and symbolized the absolute safety of this place.

Now that she had escaped to the bathroom, she would be safe. A mere cat could not hope to open a cultural convenience like a door. Triumph filled Othinus, but she froze when she heard a clattering from the door.

(It can’t be… It can’t be! Did he jump up to the doorknob and hang down by his front legs!?)

Unpleasant sweat poured from Othinus, but then she calmed. This was no mere door. It was the bathroom door. That meant it was locked from the inside. A cat was nothing but a cat, so he could not understand the concept of a lock. No matter how much he rattled the knob, it would never open.

(Your efforts are wasted! Ah hah hah!!)

Or so it should have been.

(Wait… That door *is* locked, isn’t it?)

Doubt gradually filled her head and fear soon followed.

She looked far up above.

A metal knob was placed over the cylindrical lock. It was oriented horizontally, but what did that mean? It could be horizontal or vertical, but which meant locked and which meant unlocked? She never opened the door when entering the bathroom, so she had no way of knowing.

(It’s locked, isn’t it!? If that kid was so sleepy he forgot to lock it, he’s in trouble!! Specifically, I’ll attack his Achilles tendon!!)

The door knob began to rattle so violently it felt like a murderer was breaking in.

Othinus stared up at the door while taking a few steps backwards. She knew prayer would not be enough, so she frantically turned toward the bathtub. A life-sized boy was contained inside, so she could escape this hell beast with his protection. However, she could not reach him. She was only fifteen centimeters tall, so the

sixty to seventy centimeter bathtub was no different from a sheer cliff. And the smooth plastic material left no handholds for climbing.

Shouting was her only choice.

“Heeeeey!! Wake up!! Wake up!! A god’s life is literally on the line here, so can’t you be a little flexible!?”

“Mumble, mumble… Yes, Miss Dorm Manager…”

“You’re immersed in the worst kind of dream, aren’t you!? If I die, I’ll make sure to curse you!!”

Her shouts did not reach him.

He did not hear her pleas.

And behind her, she heard a very, very quiet and yet definite sound.

It was a creak.

“Hm? Othinus? You don’t usually get up this early. Is everyone in this dorm room too hungry to wait for breakfast? Yawn…”

“……”

He received no response.

The god was held in the pet cat’s mouth like a stolen fish and taken quietly away.

XXXX

“This treatment isn’t right,” complained Othinus on the breakfast table.

Instead of sitting *at* the table, she literally sat *on* the table. Her small breakfast was placed on the upside-down cap to a plastic bottle.

“Now, I am aware my life here is meant as a special type of punishment. I am aware of that, but surely there has to be more than this!! Even in prison, people have a place to exercise and can receive items from visitors. At the very least, I think you should do something about managing that monster!”

Steam blew from Othinus’s head, but Index’s sleepy eyes suggested she was not paying much attention.

Cats had a habit of presenting captured bugs or mice to their owners, so the nun had *yet again* had an unwanted gift pressed against her face that morning.

Kamijou covered light brown toast with margarine and passed it to Index.

“You say that, but he’s just a playful kitten. Is it really worth getting that upset? You just have to put up with it until he wears himself out.”

“Multiply the size by four! For you, this would be like a three meter, two hundred kilogram Siberian tiger leaping at you! You are keeping that in mind when you speak, aren’t you!?”

Angry, Othinus started on the stir-fried vegetables in the plastic cap. She grabbed a toothpick with both hands, stabbed into the diced pieces of vegetable, and crammed them into her mouth.

“Then what am I supposed to do?” asked an exasperated Kamijou.

“Ensure my safety. Make sure I never, ever have to live in fear of that wild beast again!”

“How exactly do I do that?”

“I want you to make me a place to hide. A place just for me that the cat can’t break into.”

“But I already made you one out of cardboard yesterday.”

“That was torn to pieces in only five minutes! Not even the Three Little Pigs made a house out of paper, you fool!!”

“Hmm. But what else is there? Index, where’d those blocks go? Y’know, the colorful plastic ones you made that dinosaur out of.”

“They’re broken apart in a box in the closet.”

“You two have no intention of making me a house that won’t be destroyed, do you?”

At that point, the cheerful voice of a female announcer came from the TV they had left on.

“Today marks the beginning of December, which is when the Christmas sales war begins! This year’s theme is mini-luxury, so toys custom-made by artisans are gathering a lot of attention. These hand-made music boxes, dolls, and dollhouses all have classic and artistic value.”

“…”

“The most popular of them all is this dollhouse from a famous designer! Just look! Each of these pieces is the size of a caramel, but they are real bricks baked in a furnace and mortared together! Only a designer skilled in everything from art restoration to construction could have made this!”

“That’s it,” muttered Othinus. “The answer is right there!”

“Fine, fine. Later, I’ll make you something like that out of empty snack boxes and tape.”

“The answer is right in front of you, so stop trying to avoid it, you fool!! I’m telling you to buy me exactly that on the screen there!!”

“Eh? That thing...?”

Kamijou had a simple reason to be concerned.

The cheerful voice filled with Christmas spirit on the TV continued speaking.

“The dollhouse we introduced just now is available in the Dianoid complex of District 15, Academy City’s #1 shopping district! If you are interested, please stop by!!”

District 15 was the largest and greatest fashion location.

Not only that, but the Dianoid was a landmark for the rich and famous that contained an entire major TV station and housed entertainers on its apartment floors.

As its name suggested, every wall, pillar, window, door, light fixture, and piece of furniture inside the seventy-story building was supposedly made of diamond.

And on top of all that, the Christmas season would fill it with couples.

Altogether, it brought a weary thought to Kamijou Touma's mind: If I set foot in there, I'll die. My bad mood would kill me.

XXXX

December 1.

The scenery had changed like a switch had been thrown. Strings of LEDs were wrapped around the roadside trees, stuffed reindeer travelled here and there, and the ladies handing out tissues had transformed into miniskirt Santa Clauses.

Misaka Mikoto let out a white sigh as she walked through all that.

She wore a coat over her winter uniform, but the outfit did not look brand new since she had already taken trips to the freezing lands of Russia and Denmark.

(Things are still pretty quiet around here, but what are they like in the shopping districts?)

Not long before, the world had been reaching the boiling point over whether they should wage an all-out war against an international armed group (?) named Gremlin, but everyone was cheerful now that the danger had passed. It was possible the rebound from that fear would make the Christmas celebrations especially lively this year.

But at any rate…

(Christmas, huh? Not that it means anything to me.)

Mikoto attended Tokiwadai Middle School which was known for being a high-class girls' school even in the field of powers development. It was not a mission school that would have a packed schedule on Christmas day, but they would certainly be banned from leaving in the name of forbidding any inappropriate relationships with the opposite sex. Just like the year before, the students would be locked up in their dorm with no choice but to wait for the storm to pass.

(I could probably get out with some help from Kuroko's teleportation, but then she would be the greatest barrier standing in my way.)

As she made her preliminary plans, she suddenly frowned.

"Hm?"

What exactly did she have set as her ultimate goal?

Why was she assuming Kuroko would get in her way?

There should not be an issue if she disobeyed the school rules, left the dorm, and met up with Kuroko, Uiharu, and Saten for some girl talk.

(Wait, wait, wait! Wait just a second here. I have a bad feeling about continuing on this line of thought, so stop. Just stop. Why am I picturing that idiot in my head!?)

She rubbed her temples with her fingertips like a weary office worker, but…

"Oh? If it isn't Misaka-san."

"…"

Mikoto froze in place, turned toward the source of the voice, and found a college-aged miniskirt Santa in glasses and with her black hair tied back. She was clearly being controlled, so Mikoto shook her head and quickly walked away.

"Misaka-san? Misaka-saaaan? Can you hear me?"

"I don't need any tissues and I don't want my palm read. I don't need anything and you look like a fraud."

"Oh, dear. Is your old lady ability so strong that you're getting hard of hearing? I suppose you do have the aura of someone who's been in middle school for about a decade."

"What!? I could say the exact same thing about you and your suspicious breasts!!"

Only after shouting back did Mikoto realize she had fallen for the girl's trap.

The miniskirt Santa brought her index finger to her chin and spoke.

"I really didn't want to make this decision, but I'm here to discuss something with you."

"Why me?"

"Christmas is coming, right?"

Despite knowing she was playing right into the other girl's hands, Mikoto stopped moving.

"I'm the #5 and you're the #3, but neither of us can do anything when Tokiwadai bans us from leaving. To be blunt, the teachers' defensive ability is too much."

"Yeah, the dorm supervisors' defense routine was even directly adopted by the maximum security juvenile hall. Fighting it is hopeless."

With Level 3s at the bottom and two Level 5s at the top, Tokiwadai contained a total of around 180 espers, so the dorm supervisors needed the ability to manage them all. And those adults had to do so with technology and martial arts instead of esper powers. It made Mikoto shudder to calculate out how much of a monster her dorm supervisor had to be.

"But," said the person controlling the miniskirt Santa. "I think we lost last year because the Level 5 ability was separated. The two of us are in different dorms, but that was probably intentionally set up by the adults."

"Wait."

“So I think we could break through those solid defenses if we plan things out ahead of time and cover for each other’s weakness. The forecast says we’ll have a white Christmas this year, so wouldn’t it be too boring to spend a second year in a row stuck in our rooms?”

“…”

She had a point.

Whether it was direct or long-range support, their freedom of movement would increase dramatically with two Level 5s working together. It might give them the chance they needed to clear the walls of the impregnable high-class Alcatraz that were the Tokiwadai girls dorms.

But…

“Why do you want to enjoy Christmas so much? You mentioned it pretty casually, but it sounded like you tried this last year and failed.”

“Ehhh? What does that matter? And since you brought it up, what is it that’s tilting the scales in your mind?”

“Bfh!! I-I wasn’t thinking about anything!!”

“How suspicious.”

“Yeah, well I feel like working with you would be about the same as rescuing someone from a cell only to find out they’re some violent criminal.”

At any rate, no matter how much they disliked it, they had a common goal and joining forces for the time being seemed like a good idea.

And after thinking it through that far, both girls had the exact same thought at the exact same time.

(Yes, but I’d better betray her at the very, very end.)

With that, they poured all their strength into smiling and shook hands.

At the same time, something else happened.

A boy with spiky hair poked his head around the corner of the road.

Mikoto and the miniskirt Santa immediately let go of the other's hand. Mikoto focused on the boy like normal, but for some reason, the Santa gently looked away and tried to vanish into their surroundings.

Mikoto was curious about that, but she faced Kamijou instead. There was no real reason to call out to him, but it bothered her how his shoulders drooped in contrast to the cheerful lighting. She knew he had an annoying habit of meddling in other people's business while keeping his own problems entirely to himself.

"What's the matter?"

"Ahh…"

"What!? Why do you look on the verge of tears!?"

What had happened?

When he had confronted Academy City's #1 on his own, when he had not taken Mikoto's hand despite knowing that would mean a fall from Russia's skies, and when he had been surrounded by countless Five Overs and lost to the #3, he had not shown any tears, so the situation would have to be truly dire for him to be on the verge of giving up.

It was possible the moon would fall before Christmas arrived.

Mikoto gulped and hesitantly asked again.

"Wh-what has you feeling so cornered? Don't worry. Your big sis Mikoto will help you. There's got to be some way out of whatever it is."

"You'll listen, Misaka-san? You'll really listen to what I have to say!?"

She had a feeling listening to him would send her straight into some kind of combat space in an alternate dimension, but she could not just ignore this.

She gave a small nod to urge him on and sorrow filled his face.

"I…"

His tone of voice made it sound like the world had been destroyed once and he had gone back in time to try and fix it this time.

"I have to take two girls to the Dianoid, that fashionable date spot that stands at the top of District 15 which is already Academy City's #1 shopping district. I could not be dreading this more than I am."

……
……

Silence fell for a while.

Once Misaka Mikoto's entirely blank mind recovered, she let out the very first word that came to her mind.

"Ahhhhhhh!!???"

“Eek!? I know I’ll be completely out of place here, but I have no choice. I have to go there! District 15 is no place for me and the Christmas season only makes it worse. In all seriousness, I’ll be crushed!! The entire world is going to crush me from all sides!!!!”

“What is this? Are you the kind of person who says he’s afraid of steamed buns?”

“That’s not it! I really am scared!! The people in District 15 are from an entirely different world! I bet they all play guitars and ride motorcycles around! What even is a club and what do people do there!? I doubt I could understand a word they’re saying even though they’re speaking Japanese!!”

Kamijou trembled and, presumably due to the route he took to school, began walking down a different road from Mikoto.

At some point, the miniskirt Santa with a blank expression appeared next to her.

“Shokuhou.”

“Yes, I know more or less what you want to say.”

They both reached out their hands and exchanged a handshake with far more strength than necessary.

If their goal was Christmas Eve, they had twenty-three days until their escape from Alcatraz. Just like digging a tunnel with a spoon or pouring miso soup on the metal bars each day to induce rust, a long, long battle had begun.

XXXX

Hamazura Shiage was in Academy City’s District 2.

That district was dyed in the colors of heavy industry, especially in vehicles and ammunition. The district’s borders were famous for the special soundproofing barrier created by emitting reverse phase sound waves and, due to its field of research, it was commonly talked about in relation to weapons development.

However, Hamazura was not involved in any of that.

He was on a racing circuit. As was common in District 2, it was packed in tight like the eighteen holes of a golf course.

No one was going to complain about the great din of the engine. Traffic laws did not apply on private roads, so a student could drive around without police motorcycles beginning pursuit.

A middle-aged man’s voice came from the radio built into the full-face helmet.

“The parameters have stabilized. I’d like for you to make another two laps so we can get some averages. Keep up your current pace.”

“Is it just me or has the fuel efficiency dropped? The sound gets all warped every once in a while!”

“It’s supposed to work that way. We aren’t building a sports racing machine. It’s meant to be used in dirty car chases. Recovery speed matters more than top speed.”

A smooth and solid black suit covered Hamazura's entire body. What he rode was clearly no normal motorcycle since it had a jet engine installed.

It had no set name.

It was the successor of the prototype originally known as the Dragon Rider, but it was intentionally having its specs lowered to bring the cost down enough for mass production. Of course, if that affected its stability, it would all be for naught.

There was a simple reason for him to be riding that unannounced prototype.

"You're the best at getting on its good side. It may have been unofficial, but you're the only test driver who's used the Dragon Rider in battle."

"That was almost entirely thanks to the suit."

"Even so. Aneri perceives the outside world through you. Just like with a word processor's IME, it's fastest to have the original user do it."

Hamazura put the machine through all the requested work by travelling at just below the sound barrier and sliding around the curves more than turning.

Doing that for even two or three minutes meant a lot at those speeds.

It was a dense time that was more than enough to end someone's life.

"Thanks for the hard work."

After finishing the set number of laps, crossing the goal line, and slowly coming to a stop, a female voice reached him.

If he was remembering correctly, her name was Stephanie Gorgeouspalace. She had short blonde hair and wore white and gray snow camouflage in an extremely casual manner. She was apparently a former Anti-Skill member, but she was full of mysteries, including how she had ended up here in District 2.

Hamazura removed the full-face helmet with both hands and got down from the large motorcycle. He did not put down a kickstand, but the bike did not fall over. It automatically kept its balance using the two gyros on either side of the front wheel.

"I think that went well. The first week is enough to know whether someone will make a good test pilot and I'd say you've passed as far as that's concerned."

"I mentioned this before, but isn't this just leaving everything to the suit? I think you would get the same results with anyone."

"Ah ha ha. You don't want some great fighter or veteran warrior as your test driver. Are you letting robot anime influence you too much? What you want are communication skills and the ability to adlib in case of unexpected trouble. More specifically, you want someone who can objectively explain anything that seems off to them. In other words, a talkative person who says whatever comes to mind is best."

"Oh."

Hamazura nodded despite not really understanding.

He had a simple reason for doing this.

Mugino Shizuri, Kinuhata Saiai, and Takitsubo Rikou still belonged to Item, but he did not want them doing any jobs for the dark side. But could he provide a raison d'être…or rather, a foundation of income in their place? And could he do it without stealing cars or robbing ATMs?

He was not very smart, he was hopelessly stuck at Level 0, he had no "weapons" he could put down on a resume, and even his abilities with cars and lock picking were useless in the adult world without the proper "credentials".

He had searched for something he could do despite all that and he had ended up here in District 2.

"Oh, right. Your phone has been vibrating for a while now, so if you take a break, you should probably check your email."

"Thanks. I'll do that as soon as I submit the report to-…"

He trailed off because he heard the quiet rumbling of an engine and then felt a heavy impact on his hip. He looked down and found the nameless prototype pressing up against his side.

The action was a lot like a cat throwing itself against the newspaper to keep its owner from reading it.

Stephanie burst out laughing.

"Ah ha ha. Aneri's jealous."

"It's just driver assistance software, isn't it? I doubt it can analyze things like that."

Suddenly, Stephanie's phone began to ring. She pressed the mobile to her ear, exchanged a few words, and glanced toward Hamazura.

(Hm? What was that for?)

"Yes, yes. Understood. Don't worry, don't worry. I can manage with just one truck. You don't need a license to use a Power Lifter, so it'll all work out as long as I grab someone who has nothing else to do. See ya."

She hung up and announced the decision she had already made.

"Hamazura, are you interested in seeing District 15 during the Christmas season?"

"What?"

"The big TV station inside the Dianoid has requested we carry something in for them. It has to go from District 2 to District 15, but to move the air freight container inside, you have to use the stairs or the elevator which rules out a forklift. We'll have to use two Power Lifters instead."

"Wait, wait. Power Lifters? I have no idea what one of those looks like, much less how to use it."

"Don't worry. It's mostly just a unit you wear on the back with two huge steel arms attached. Add it to your body and it's like having four arms."

"Oh, okay. Well, if it's as easy as using stilts…"

"You have until this evening. If you learn how to use it now, you won't have to worry about tripping on top of someone and killing them."

“That’s plenty to worry about!! You mean this could kill someone!?”

XXXX

Even when lunchtime rolled around, Kamijou Touma was still in a gloomy mood.

Currently, he, Aogami Pierce, and Tsuchimikado Motoharu were surrounding a single desk and engaged in a three-way death match. However, they were not grappling with each other. Instead, they had made small paper fans from loose leaf paper and were attempting to throw them at a target sitting on the teacher’s desk.

One might wonder why this refined game had gained popularity here, but it had started with a comment from their history teacher. It had gone something like this:

“Fan throwing was enjoyed from the end of the Edo period to the Meiji period, but in modern times it’s only found at traditional restaurants in Gion or Akasaka.” (Teacher)

“What!? You mean it’s a geisha game!? I want to play it! I so want to play it! I want to play with a geisha! Or at least feel like I am!!” (Idiots)

And so…

“Nyah. When you first mentioned it before homeroom this morning, I thought you were crazy and wanted to pick you up and chuck you out the window, but now that I’ve had time to think about it, sneaking into District 15’s Dianoid would be scary as hell. Those fashionable areas caught up in Christmas sales wars are super scary! Even if nothing happens, it feels like some kind of field effect is wearing down your health!!”

“I just let it slide since it was Kamijou Touma’s doing, but what happened this morning seems worth ending up in the newspaper to me.”

They had already eaten their lunch, so they were now competing over who had to throw out the stinky classroom trash.

However, leaving the loose leaf paper fans lying around would make Komoe sad, so they would need to clean that up too. That’s why they would have to copy down their math and physics notes on crinkled paper.

“If you want to see miniskirt Santas, the glitzy District 15 really isn’t your best bet. District 12 with its theology and economics or District 14 and all of its foreign students are the places to go for that. But if you prefer slutty part-timer girls, I won’t stop you, Kami-yan! Just as Japan is the land of countless gods, it’s also the land of countless fetishes!!”

“You’re going to piss off some important religious person like that, Aogami. Anyway, I hear the entire Dianoid building is made of diamond. Are they messing with us or something?”

“Your information’s gotten twisted after an unintentional game of telephone there, nyah. It’s technically made of carbon materials like carbon fiber, carbon frames, and carbon nanotubes which have some artificial diamond inside, nyah. If it was all diamond, it would actually be really brittle and it’d break apart after a good gust of wind or an earthquake. And diamond burns when you set it on fire, nyah.”

“…”

“…”

“Eh? Eh? Why aren’t you two saying anything, nyah?”

“You keep saying how scared you are of the place, but you sure know a lot about it,” said Kamijou.

“Do you think he’s the type who tries to have his cake and eat it too by constantly calling himself an otaku but secretly being popular? I won’t allow it. I’ll never allow iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiittttttttttttt!!”

Aogami Pierce stepped outside of tolerant society, threw a loose leaf paper fan like a shuriken, and just barely grazed the edge of the target (Tsuchimikado’s pencil case) on the teacher’s desk.

Actual fan throwing apparently had over fifty standards by which to judge a throw, but since these idiots had trouble enough even hitting the target, they simplified it as much as an old-folks cellphone and said whoever hit it first would win.

Tsuchimikado then made use of the kind of strength one gains in a crisis.

“What!? When have I ever claimed to be a full-blown otaku!? I’m a perfectly normal person who just so happens to love his step sister, nyah!!”

“Heh. I’m relieved, Tsuchimikado. From the moment you claim having a thing for your step sister is normal, you’ve proven yourself a proper Japanese otaku who can go anywhere without feeling shame. I’m relieved that you’ll never escape that label.”

“You son of a bitch. Are you insulting the world’s little sisters?”

“I never put one fetish over another. Even if she has the lower half of a snake or a spider, I say you gladly accept. What’s that? You were expecting a girl with cat ears but got a full realistic cat head? So what!?”

Kamijou Touma had been left out of the conversation for a while, but he was avoiding scattering fans like a submachine gun and instead carefully taking aim like a sniper.

And like an assassin hidden in the bushes, he stabbed his friends in the back.

“Y’know, you’ve dyed your hair blond and wear sunglasses in class while you’ve dyed your hair blue and pierced your ears. It looks to me like you two want to be popular more than anyone else.”

“What!?”

“D-don’t be ridiculous, Kami-yan. Can you stop changing the Akashic records!?”

“You keep calling yourself an otaku, but it feels like you’re trying to place yourself higher than others by thinking of yourself as better than those other otaku around you.”

“G-g-gbaaahhh!!!???”

“Wh-where’d this come from? What did we ever do to you, Kami-yan!? It’s not like you were wanted alive or dead and the entire class chased you around trying to kill you, so nothing calls for that kind of cruelty!!”

With his competitive spirit worked up, Demon King Kamijou Touma raised his right hand.

He held the fan up gently as if placing it on a current of air and he made a declaration.

“Whether as a wife or whatever else, it’s gotta be a lovely dorm managerrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!”

The loose leaf paper fan flew like a knife, but unfortunately…

“Ah.”

The pencil case fell over before the fan reached it.

It seemed to have lost to Kamijou’s lung capacity.

And the three idiots toppled over as well.

XXXX

After school, Kamijou Touma returned to his dorm and then left again with Index and Othinus.

Their destination was District 15 and the giant Dianoid complex that was its primary landmark.

“Wow, it really is December. It’s only 5:30, but it’s already dark out.”

Kamijou was wearing his normal school uniform because he had decided any attempt at fashionable clothing would be trounced by the real deal.

Index was wearing her usual white nun’s habit and he did not really want anyone to see Othinus in the first place.

When they had left, Othinus had been in his coat pocket, but she had climbed out at some point. She was now sitting on his shoulder and inside the scarf around his neck.

“You can’t see any stars in the sky from here. Is this a part of science’s insistence on sterilizing everything?”

“Touma. I hear a flute over there. Is that the charumera[1] I’ve heard so much about!?”

“Stop it, Index. If we take a detour here, I’ll definitely lose my nerve to visit the Dianoid! And if we eat ramen at a roadside stand, I can only imagine Othinus will end up falling right into the bowl when I lean over!!”

They used the subway to reach District 15. As always, Index had trouble with the automatic gate not opening even when she put in her ticket and Othinus’s small body was just about swallowed up by the machine along with her ticket, but they somehow managed to overcome their hardships.

The train’s hanging advertisements and flat-screen monitors were filled with the Christmas spirit.

They were on a direct line to the Dianoid, so there were a lot of advertisements for it.

“The diamond tower that towers above District 15 as a landmark. The Dianoid is filled with ultra high-class brand-name shops that have all passed our unique selection criteria, so you can find anything here. Whether you want time, space, freedom, or relaxation, you can find what your life is lacking.”

“This is a notification of public live broadcasts. TV Orbit’s Dianoid broadcast office is seeking audiences for its programs. The December programs are as follows: 12/1 – Hysterical Prize Quiz. 12/8 – Quiz Video King Finals. 12/13 – Craftsmen of the World. 12/19 – Afternoon Siesta. 12/24 – Music Stream Awards. 12/25 –

[1] An instrument commonly associated with ramen stands.

Illumination Top Hundred. 12/30 – Christmas Backstage Secrets. 12/31 – Enter the New Year Roaring with Laughter.”

“The fifth public lot selection for the top floor’s apartment area begins soon. These nine room apartments have become known as hideouts for celebrities, so why not nab yourself a luxurious status symbol and join the elites?”

Each consecutive advertisement filled Kamijou further and further with despair.

He began wondering if this was a completely different world that was no place for someone who tried to make sure the ramen would last as long as possible to help with the food bill.

Meanwhile, Othinus spoke cheerfully from his scarf.

“It’s all so worldly. Not to mention that they’re presenting it all in a way to make it seem high-class instead of letting it naturally feel that way. What’s even the difference between ‘celebrity’ and ‘luxury’ in this one?”

“I just want to get the shopping done with so we can have more time to eat,” said Index.

“We’re here for my home, you fool. Use your perfect memory to memorize the scene of our meal and think about it later, energy-saving nun.”

“Mh. Sphinx!!”

“Gyaaah!!”

Othinus’s hair bristled and she retreated inside the scarf. Once the calico cat attempted to dig her out, Kamijou felt the need to stop it.

Meanwhile, the train arrived at the District 15 station.

Kamijou followed the current of people out onto the platform. A lot of them were around his age, but few of them were the sparkling type who looked like they had stepped out of the TV. It was possible they would soon transform into that in a bathroom or karaoke box, though.

“This is District 15? Hmm, it doesn’t look that different,” said Index.

“That’s because we’re still underground.”

“You said the Dianoid is made of diamond, right!? Touma, can we go there now? The sooner we finish this errand, the longer we can eat!!”

“We’re already there, actually.”

His answer caused both Index and Othinus to tilt their heads.

The cat was the only carefree one as it mewed in the nun’s arms.

“The subway station is built into the Dianoid, so you’re automatically there once the train arrives.”

“Hmm…”

Index looked up at the ceiling that was not all that tall and not all that pretty.

“T-Touma, where’s the overwhelming feeling of being in a big building?”

That was not his problem.

X X X X

He had always thought calling people “girly” was a little insulting to girls.

Regardless, he hated how much of a crybaby he was.

But no matter how much he hated it, his knees would start shaking whenever he was shoved a little or driven into the slightest predicament. The tears would start welling up in his eyes and, before he could even think about stopping them, his mind would go blank and he would find himself unable to think at all.

“In the end, it’s all about how you look at it.”

A blonde girl had once told him that while standing by his side.

“I mean, if you look at it the other way, it means you can shed tears for anyone’s tragedy, right? That’s nothing to be embarrassed about. In fact, I think you can be proud of it.”

That girl’s casual words had saved him.

But at the same time, she had spoken them from a sort of distance as if saying it was amazing because she could not do the same thing.

He did not know what kind of world she lived in.

They were together when walking down the streets, but it was like they belonged to two large circles that only overlapped ever so slightly on the edge. There was an extremely thin yet definite gap between them that gave him that impression.

She never mentioned it, so he assumed she did not want to talk about it. She did not reveal the truth, so he assumed she did not want him to know. He had decided to respect her decision. It did not matter what world that blonde girl lived in as long as she would come to visit him.

He was certain there was a place for him in her heart.

It may have been a tiny place driven far out of the spotlight, but that was enough for him.

Until the day she had suddenly vanished, that is.

“…”

The boy held his hand up toward the purple sky that was shifting from evening to night.

He held a small card in that hand.

Aihana Etsu.

Academy City’s #6 Level 5.

That would be his title from now on.

Student ID cards had dozens of anti-counterfeiting techniques worked in and not even the currency printed outside Academy City could compare, but he had managed to secure the name Aihana Etsu. The photograph, blood type, and a few other pieces of data had been altered, but the rest was identical to the real one.

Then again, the concept of real and fake may not have applied here.

“Aihana Etsu” was a mere student, so he of course did not have the means of producing a card that slipped through those anti-counterfeiting techniques. Even after his very best effort, he could only give it the mere appearance of the real one and any specialized reader would immediately identity it as fake.

However, he had torn the card he made into three pieces.

Currency for example had watermarks and holograms that could not be copied, but if they were torn apart so only those portions were missing, they were indistinguishable from a real one. And if two thirds of a bill were brought to a bank, it could be exchanged for a real one. With only the torn puzzle pieces, the clerk had no way of telling if it was real or fake.

“Aihana Etsu” had done the same thing.

He had intentionally destroyed his incomplete counterfeit card and omitted only the portions he had no way of faking himself. He had gathered the remaining puzzle pieces and boldly sent them to the real Aihana Etsu’s school with a document saying his school ID card had been destroyed and he needed a new one.

Fortunately, that process was automated.

If a live clerk had handled it and spoken to the real Aihana Etsu, the jig would have been up.

(Still, this isn’t going to fool them forever. At most, it’ll last a day or two after the card was sent out. This is my only chance to use the real one’s reputation. I need to make my attack on the Dianoid and find a clue to bringing her back in that time.)

This was based on something the blonde girl named Frenda Seivelun had said.

She apparently had a secret base in a high-class apartment on the upper levels of the Dianoid. She had said it was a truly free space that had no connection to the light or the dark.

She had not necessarily vanished there, but it was the one clue “Aihana Etsu” had. If that was a place where she could reveal her true self, then some information related to her disappearance could remain there. If she had gotten into some trouble in the “darkness” that he was unaware of, then he might be able to get a look into that darkness through the Dianoid.

Whatever he was going to do, that was his first step.

No matter what happened, he would bring Frenda back.

It did not matter how reckless people said he was being.

“Okay.”

He clenched his small hands.

Something switched over within him and he shifted his gaze from the purple sky and to the area directly ahead.

Some dangerous people had already slipped into the scenery.

Before he had become “Aihana Etsu”, people much like these had dragged the boy into a back alley, given him more than ten “warning” blows, and then thrown him onto a pile of trash. He did not know who they had been hired by or why, but he knew they would wield violence against him.

His heart leaped into his throat.

Sweat poured down his face.

He squeezed a hand against his chest and tried to control himself.

The timing was the same as the other day. They were not the exact same people, but that may have been to not rouse suspicions when the same person was sent out again and again.

Whatever the case, he could not fool anyone if he did not fool the very first person.

If that happened, he would not be able to continue on.

He stared ahead.

He used all of his strength to restrain his true weak self that threatened to appear on his face. There were more than ten of them. They pretended to be unrelated passersby, but they were undoubtedly cruel people working together.

In that case, aiming for the weakest one would have the opposite effect.

To mentally overpower them all, he had to start with the strongest one.

He slowly walked toward a large man in a thick leather jacket who had barbed wire wrapped around his sleeves.

“Aihana Etsu” finally began his fight.

“Are you the one I was promised?”

“What?”

“I’m Aihana Etsu. I take it you’re the commendable professional punching bag who’s willing to be my guinea pig for money?”

“…”

“Aihana Etsu” thrust forward the ID card and the guy stopped moving briefly.

He was understandably skeptical.

No one would be stupid enough to take “Aihana Etsu” at his word.

But that just meant the boy needed to change the direction of that doubt.

“Oh, c’mon. Don’t tell me you thought you were going to get ten thousand yen just for letting some neighborhood kid hit you. If so, you’re in for a rude awakening. Someone must have lied to you. Then again, you’ve already received the money for becoming a Level 5’s guinea pig and recovering in the hospital, so I don’t want to hear any complaints.”

“You…”

His mind very nearly went black.

It would have had it not been for his opponent's next comment.

"You've gotta be kidding me! Aihana Etsu!? So that's why this seemed like such a good deal!!"

It never developed into an actual conversation.

That mass of muscles had seemed like an unpassable wall, but he turned right around as if the wind had blown him. He ran off as quickly as he could. He even ran into a group of illegally parked bicycles and tripped quite spectacularly. When the others saw their mental pillar gasping for breath and crawling away, the confusion and panic spread to them.

"Aihana Etsu" held the card between his right hand's index and middle fingers and thrust it forward like a knife.

That was enough for the men gathered around a distant wind turbine to fall onto their butts. It was not that they were especially cowardly. He slowly moved the card from one target to the other, which was enough to send those grinning pawns to the ground where they backed away.

The next thing he knew, they were all gone.

He had eliminated the barrier.

His blanking mind, racing heart and trembling knees had all stopped.

"Aihana Etsu" had become Aihana Etsu.

"Heh heh."

Laughter escaped his lips.

With only a single card as a weapon, Aihana Etsu doubled over.

"Ah ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!"

He used his index finger to wipe away the tears in his eyes and he thought as his cheeks flushed.

(To hell with Academy City. To hell with Level 5. To hell with the hierarchy! To hell with the pyramid structure!! I overcame it all. I've made it through the first gate! Now… Now no one can stop me. I'll have you show me where you've hidden that girl!!)

He walked toward the Dianoid.

He walked toward that carbon labyrinth that contained the hint he needed to rescue his missing friend, Frenda Seivelun, from the deep, deep darkness.

"I'm Aihana Etsu."

Half for practice and half to put himself in the role, he whispered that as he walked down the empty path.

"I'm Aihana Etsu."

He was certain he would be saying that more often from now on. When he needed to rely on that, he would be under a great pressure that would threaten to peel back the disguise.

“I’m Aihana Etsu.”

Suddenly, a dumb-looking girl appeared around a corner.

She must not have expected him to be there because she stared at him in surprise.

They were within a meter of each other, so they could have easily collided had they been careless.

And they both spoke in unison.

“I’m Aihana Etsu!!”

“I’m Aihana Etsu!!”

Aihana Etsu was shocked.

As if aiming handguns or knives, their arms crossed each other and held out student ID cards that were identical save for the photo.

He doubted this girl was the real one and she most likely doubted he was.

Their minds were synchronized.

Their hearts skipped a beat and they both squeezed a hand against their chest.

(Oh, no. She’s the same as me!!!)

(Oh, no. He’s the same as me!!!)

The next thing they knew, the two Aihana Etsus had scattered in different directions.

Both identity thieves complained in their hearts that the distant Level 5 needed to guard his or her identity better.

X X X X

The city was decorated with lights and the roads were filled with wine red or mustard yellow sports cars, but on that night, a large truck raced through District 15.

Stephanie Gorgeouspalace was driving and Hamazura Shiage sat in the passenger seat.

“Wow. Now that’s amazing.”

“You mean the Dianoid?”

“There is that, but also this truck! Isn’t this one of those decorated trucks you’d see on Truck Yarou or something!? And the sides are covered in a huge picture of some singer! It completely ruins the mood!! Do you have something against District 15!?”

“Heh heh heh. Well, I am the representative of single women everywhere. Ahh, it pisses me off how all these brats use their love lives to escape reality and forget all about being a student. I so want to blast a confiscated dirty song at full volume!!”

“Okay, how about you start by apologizing to single women everywhere. You can’t just pick yourself as their representative!!”

“Ehh? It doesn’t annoy you to see a place filled with so much consumption and couples? Doesn’t it make you want to shout, ‘Uraaah! We’re the ones who are stuck at work on the 24th!’ ”

“Actually, I have Christmas Eve off and I plan to spend it with my girlfriend.”

“Okay then. It looks like someone is about to have a full day…no, three full days of consecutive shifts for the 24th and for New Year’s.”

“You monster!!”

As he shouted at her, the out-of-place truck approached the Dianoid. It was carrying a two meter air freight container meant for transporting art as well as two special pieces of heavy machinery called Power Lifters.

“This kind of place really scares me. If I ever invited someone here, they’d just assume I was trying to get into their pants and give me a cold look.”

“Oh? You never came here looking for marks during your delinquent days? The amount in a wallet here would’ve been completely different.”

“If we targeted places like this, the back alleys would’ve been wiped clean in a heartbeat.”

The building was a giant hexagonal prism rising seventy stories high. Whether for decoration or reinforcement, several thick wires extended diagonally down from all sides. District 15 was packed full of high-rise buildings, but the wires slipped through the gaps between them all. The central building and the surrounding wires were brilliantly illuminated by the lights on the ground and its majesty stood out clearly in the dark night. To emphasize that this was a form of optical art and not just illumination, the coloration changed as time passed.

“It’s primarily divided into the upper level, the mid level, and the lower level. Our delivery spot is TV Orbit on the mid level. After using the delivery entrance, it’s a single elevator away, so there shouldn’t be any way to get lost.”

“We’re taking *those* on an elevator?”

Hamazura turned around even though he could not see them from there.

Stephanie laughed.

“The upper level contains a high-class hotel and apartments. They take in plenty of grand pianos and home theater systems, so the elevator is rumored to have a huge weight limit. But if it doesn’t work, we’ll be stuck using *them* to carry the container up the stairs.”

The Dianoid supposedly doubled as District 15’s subway station and the elevated highway and subway line were apparently laid out to cross each other like an intersection. There was a main entrance at all four cardinal directions, but the ridiculously decorated truck used a delivery entrance prepared in a more inconspicuous location.

While Stephanie rolled down the window at the gate and spoke with the worker there, Hamazura's cellphone beeped. It was an email rather than a call. He checked it and Stephanie asked him about it while humming and turning the steering wheel.

"Who was that from?"

"Some friends. They're waiting for me on the Dianoid's mid level."

"The mid level? Isn't that entirely taken up by TV Orbit's offices?"

"Part of it's opened up to the public. There's a viewing platform, a pool, a gym, and some other things there. It's of course made so the normal people and the entertainers never cross paths, but they have to be there. I hear they like to go have some fun after finishing a day's work."

"Eh heh heh. I see you're enjoying your youth. Maybe I can go there once Sunazara wakes up."

The gate led to an indoor parking lot. It was surrounded by cold manmade walls, but not from the gray concrete normally found in parking decks or parking garages. The ground, the ceiling, and the thick columns positioned at set intervals all looked like they were made of wood.

As a whole…

"It looks like a misguided attempt at a medieval Japanese building in a Hollywood movie."

"It may look like that, but it's all made from carbon. I could ram the truck into it and it wouldn't leave a dent. I really don't get fashion."

Stephanie parked the truck in a large guest space and they both got out. She spun a key ring around her index finger, but before she could circle behind the truck, Hamazura used two wires to open the lock on the container.

"Y'know, skills are really in how you use them. A sexy spy and a greasy stalker are really doing the same thing."

"?"

Hamazura opened the double doors with a confused look on his face.

The first thing he saw was a silver die larger than he was.

It was actually the artwork container.

Beyond it were the Power Lifters. Several rubber belts stretched down from the ceiling to secure the large metal backpacks, giant arms extending from them, and smaller legs were added for stability control. The arms were so large they nearly reached the ground when dangling down.

There were two of them. One for Hamazura and one for Stephanie.

That was probably also meant to provide a spare in case something happened.

"How are you with a Power Lifter?"

"I worked my ass off studying those things for five hours! Do you have any idea how often I almost got my flesh caught in the front joint!?"

“Aneri’s assisting you, so you’ll be fine.”

Hamazura roared complaints as he stepped inside and removed the rubber belts.

Unlike a military powered suit, the Power Lifter did not cover its wearer in armor. Much like the difference between a tank and a power shovel, it was probably an issue of regulations for civilian products instead of a logical decision.

They were controlled by two joysticks connected by cables and by the foot pedals that attached one’s feet to the legs. It seemed outdated compared to the powered suits that detected the movements of one’s muscles and it felt more like a vehicle than a suit.

He climbed in, something like the safety bar on a roller coaster lowered to hold him in place, and dancing light assaulted his vision as soon as it powered on.

“Wah! Dammit!!”

“Wait, wait, wait! That thing’s two tons, so please don’t flail your arms and stumble around.”

“Sorry, but I’m just not used to this.”

“Oh, the AUD?” asked Stephanie.

Hamazura massaged his temples with his fingers and shook his head because bluish-white light had appeared to form windows, bars, and warning messages. The images seemed to have appeared in empty air.

“The air is locally heated or cooled to create an abnormal refraction of light that displays the necessary information on top of the scene behind it. From what I hear, it’s kind of like a mirage, but not really.”

“I get the idea behind it, but that’s not the problem.”

Sight worked by the brain analyzing the information captured by the eyeballs. AR, 3D goggles, and head-mounted displays used the eyes in ways they were not made for, so they would confuse some people’s brains. For example, some people who watched intense action movies on a head-mounted display would get motion sickness in less than five minutes.

On top of that, a warm hairdryer-like wind and a cool wind were constantly changing the temperature of the air right in front of his face, so his eyes got all dried out. But if they were going to add any thick protective glass, they might as well go for a goggle display to begin with.

(I guess this is about what I would expect of an Academy City prototype.)

“No errors in the two primary power sources, the spare power source, the stability control, the processor, or the fly-by-light. Actuators 001 through 400 have completed their triple auto-test. The system is all green. Manually release the final safety.”

“Fortunately, the Dianoid is entirely made of solid carbon materials down to the last sliding door and lantern, so you won’t damage anything if you trip. Just take it easy.”

“Are you sure I should be doing this just because it doesn’t require a license?”

“It’ll be fine as long as you don’t kill anyone.”

“Please stop scaring me!!”

During their exchange, they completed their preparations in the truck.

Hamazura took his first nervous step and reached for the container more as something to support him than to get the job done. He slowly moved the giant steel arm over the edge of the die and finally used both arms to grab the handhold.

Stephanie moved with surprising grace as she slipped herself and the Power Lifter between the container and truck wall and circled to the other side. Finally, they lifted the container like two movers carrying a sofa.

Unlike with his actual fingers, Hamazura could not feel the strength of his grip and was worried he was holding it too tightly, but at the very least, the metal fingers did not break through the container.

(Is this…actually going to work?)

“Hamazura, let’s step out like this.”

“Can you do that backwards?”

“I have more experience than you.”

They slipped out of the truck as they chatted, but…

“?”

The Power Lifter was a three meter mass of steel. It was not a military device, but its reinforced arms could still easily lift up a small car. Afraid of having someone caught in its path, Hamazura was being overly attentive to his surroundings and that may have been why he noticed this.

A small form was sneaking between the cars. The person had semi-long brown hair, a hooded jacket, shorts, boots, a bright sky blue shirt, and similarly colored socks.

(Um… Is that a boy or a girl?)

“Teacher.”

“What?”

“This isn’t directly related to our job, but let’s say a small child is hanging around near our work truck. If they look like they’re about to duck below a car, what should a good worker do?”

“Even if it isn’t directly related to our results, anything that could be a risk to our business needs to be eliminated. In other words, hey you!!”

“Wah! Don’t let go of the container!!”

Stephanie manipulated the three meter body to raise its steel hands.

A moment later, a shocked small form jumped up from behind a car. They tried to run away while almost falling over, but they messed up, collapsed into a sitting position, trembled on the ground, and held out what appeared to be a student ID card.

“I-I-I-I-I-I-I’m-I-I-I’m-I’m Academy City’s #6, Aihana Etsu!!”

Hamazura’s throat instantly dried up.

He felt a squeezing in his heart.

Uncontrollable warning signals filled his entire body. Thanks to his time wandering the back alleys as a Level 0, he knew firsthand just how frightening powerful espers were.

But Stephanie Gorgeouspalace cut the kid off with another yell.

“Yeah!? Well, I’m a teacher! You’d better not be underestimating athletic Miss Stephanie and her esper containment combat routines!!”

“Hyaaah!!”

Hamazura finally caught on when he saw “Aihana Etsu” hold up his hands to protect himself from this grown adult’s full-volume shouting.

“Wait, teacher! They’re just a kid!”

“Now you’re pissing me off! You’re a kid too, so stop trying to act like an adult!!”

“I think you’re the one that needs to be contained right now!!”

As the two three meter machines finished grappling next to the container, the previous…boy?...girl?...was nowhere to be seen.

Assuming one of the steel arms had not scored a home run on the kid at some point, they must have run off.

X X X X

Kamijou Touma, Index, and Othinus took an elevator from the subway station and to the shopping area of the lower level.

The shopping area covered the first to twentieth floors, but the center of those floors had been opened into an atrium. Looking up gave one the bizarre sensation of being sucked up into the heavens.

Most of the lighting was indirect and filled the building with soft flesh tones. The most notable characteristic was the interior. The structure itself was that of a high-rise building, but each individual part was much more similar to Japanese-style construction. The seemingly wooden flooring was polished to an amber color and the space was divided up by sliding doors and screens rather than Western doors. Even the aforementioned lighting came from square paper lanterns hanging from the ceiling.

The Christmas spirit seemed to have vanished the second they set foot inside.

Kamijou spoke his general impression aloud.

“I get the feeling Kanzaki would like this place.”

If she had heard that, she might have angrily shouted that all this was fake, but he could not help it since it had the same image.

The only other notable feature was the decorative flat-screen monitors installed here and there. Some were attached to the walls and columns and others hung from the ceiling on thin arms.

When Index saw the footage they displayed, she tilted her head.

“Touma, what TV is that? The newspaper didn’t list it.”

“I’m not sure whether I should be amazed you’ve memorized the TV guide or concerned that you have that much free time,” groaned Kamijou. “That’s a behind-the-scenes broadcast from TV Orbit. The mid level up above is a TV station, so an AD or someone goes around backstage with a small camera. It isn’t broadcast over the air, but some idol fans come to the Dianoid just to see it.”

“TV station?”

“Oh, damn. I have to start my explanation there?”

The flat-screen monitors hanging from the ceiling were currently displaying footage of male idol Hitotsui Hajime asleep on his dressing room couch. The clear division between cheers and boos coming from the crowds was just plain cruel.

And instead of just one behind-the-scenes video, it switched to a new one every few minutes. Like a DJ choosing songs, the segues between footage seemed to form a single presentation.

“The viewing platform on the mid level is known as the Aqua Palace due to its focus on water art which includes the world’s largest indoor fountain.”

As Kamijou listened to that announcement, he heard Othinus speak from her position on his shoulder and inside his scarf.

“So where is the store selling the artisan-made dollhouse?”

“Wait, wait. I printed that out at the convenience store.”

He dug through his pocket, unfolded the map, and checked on the location.

“Okay, it’s on the fifth floor. Taking the escalator would probably be faster than the elevator.”

“Touma, Sphinx is getting really restless.”

“I wouldn’t if I were you, calico cat. I know you want to sharpen your claws, but everything here is made of carbon materials and I bet even the sliding doors would stop a bullet. Your claws can’t even scratch them.”

With that, they took the escalator to the fifth floor.

Because the center formed a giant atrium, only half the space was usable. Even so, 350 brand-name shops had been crammed inside. They were located across from the atrium (which meant on the “outside” edge) and they ranged from the size of a small convenience store to larger than a tennis court.

“Mh.”

Once they arrived on the fifth floor, Othinus spoke from his shoulder.

Index also stared blankly ahead while holding the cat in both hands.

“It looks crowded.”

“Well, it was featured on the morning news, so other people must have decided to stop by just like us.”

“Wait a second. I don’t mind if it’s popular, but if we miss out on the dollhouse, what happens to my days of peace!?”

“Hmm,” groaned Kamijou while looking up at the ceiling. “I guess I could make a box out of cardboard and tape it together.”

“The cat would tear that apart almost immediately!!”

“If you don’t want it destroyed, then live in something smooth and without joints,” said Index. “You could put an upside down wash basin down over yourself.”

“Don’t you get that the cat is smart enough to lift up the wash basin!?”

Those two did not understand the threat.

Othinus realized she could not let things continue like this, so she pulled herself from Kamijou’s scarf.

“I refuse…”

She jumped down from his shoulder.

“…to accept this!!”

As soon as she landed on the wooden-looking floor, she took off running through the crowd’s feet and toward the shop.

This was a problem for Kamijou and Index.

“That girl!! How does she plan to buy it when she’s fifteen centimeters tall!? In fact, I could see her being mistaken for some new kind of doll and ripped apart to see how she works!!”

“This is an emergency, but don’t worry, Touma. Sphinx, go!!”

“Ahhh!! That’s just adding fuel to the fire!!”

By the time Kamijou cried out, it was already too late.

The cat gently landed on the floor and took off after Othinus like a hunting dog.

Crushed underfoot, torn apart, or caught by a feline hunter.

Kamijou grew quite blue as he imagined what could happen to Othinus in the near future.

“A-anyway, we have to find her! Listen, Index. Keep your eyes down. Do not! I repeat, *do not* step on her!!”

“Hm?”

“I’m not kidding!! Don’t you step on Othinus!!”

X X X X

Even here, Takitsubo Rikou was wearing a pink track suit.

The Dianoid's mid level contained the TV Orbit office, but that included a viewing platform, indoor pool, gym, and other facilities that were set up so there was no overlap with the entertainers and production team. The lower level was filled by high-class brand-name shops where one bought products, but the mid level was filled with movie theaters, beauty salons, restaurants, and other services that were consumed on site. Unlike the lower level, the Japanese-style construction included a focus on water here. For example, narrow waterways made from wooden troughs ran along the side of the corridors like the canals of Kyoto.

But these girls were inside a café that took up the entire perimeter of the floor to provide a view of District 15's dazzling night scenery.

It was built to provide a relaxing atmosphere, so the guests could set the aroma, music, light intensity, and light color in each individual partition. They could also rent massage chairs and footbaths. This was the type of café that made its money on the extra table fees instead of on their coffee.

Currently, Takitsubo spoke while her chair vibrated for a massaging effect.

"Hamazura says he'll be here in another half hour."

"Oh? That's super fast for him," replied Kinuhata Saiai, a girl with a brown bob cut who sat at the same table.

She would occasionally breathe in from a clear mask attached to an oxygen tank and tilt her head as if wondering how it was supposed to be relaxing.

However, she did not stop there. She went on to hesitantly turn around.

"The real problem is all the shopping bags we've super collected already."

"What? Hamazura was the one who told us to kill time until he got here," said Mugino Shizuri, the culprit, as she crossed her legs.

Kinuhata gave an annoyed sigh.

"He just meant to wander around for a while! Why did you start buying a super lot of stuff all of a sudden!?"

"Because I have a card."

"I super can't see how someone like her managed to work underground jobs!!"

"Mugino, Kinuhata, think about the other customers."

However, the other two girls were not the type to listen to Takitsubo.

"And what is this!? You have pair after pair of super identical pumps!!"

"You can't tell the difference between El Asine and White Snake? Are you my grandmother?"

"Shut up, Miss Celebrity! I'm the one that's super mad right now!"

"No matter what Mugino buys, she always breaks the heels off so she can move better as soon as she gets into a fight."

"That's why the El Asine twin heels have a hinge. The heels fold down when you need to move."

“Then you super don’t need the heels in the first place! Wear some flat sneakers already! …Honestly, if we weren’t paying attention, you’d super buy an apartment with that card.”

“Are you trying to say it’s all on me? It’s all my fault?”

“Mugino, don’t use Meltdowner here.”

“Yeah, it is your fault. And who’s going to carry that pile of bags? What a pain! This is why I super suggested we should go see a movie to kill some time.”

Takitsubo breathed out through her nose and let her eyes wander.

They had ordered a goldfish tank as an option and it calmed her heart to see the red things fluttering around.

Meanwhile, Mugino gave a mocking shrug.

“A movie? You mean that one where they strap you in your seat for twenty-four hours straight!? That is not *some* time! At a full day, that’s pretty much imprisonment!!”

“Hypnos is a super experimental visual experience that works in the visions you see when you’re woozy from sleep deprivation! This is the problem with people who super feel like talking about movies without doing any research.”

“Sounds like a D movie.”

“You super casual! That’s not even a real classification!!”

The situation quickly devolved into chaos.

They constantly called him their underling, but Hamazura had rapidly become the grease needed to keep Item running smoothly.

X X X X

A great number of people moved throughout the Dianoid.

A girl must have wanted to knit because she was looking at the wool. A boy was visiting multiple stores to see if he could get the exact same product any cheaper. A wealthy man simply looked lonely. A high school girl had come here for the status but could not find anything to actually do.

Among them all, a group faced completely different directions yet communicated their thoughts as if whispering.

“*St. Germain is about to move.*”

One leaned against the wall.

“*Even a conservative estimate puts it at more than ten centuries. After the long journey, St. Germain has finally found it.*”

One passed by the other people in a wood grain corridor.

"*St. Germain will gain it all before the other Magic Gods.*"

Two remained back to back.

Like a gentle ripple, the power of a gentle thought propagated from person to person.

Finally, it gathered in one point of the Dianoid and urged on a certain action.

"*So why not throw in a bit of harassment? Why not destroy his so-called plan?*"

X X X X

Kamijou Touma had gotten separated from the others in the crowd.

Palm-sized Othinus and the cat were one thing, but Index stood out like a sore thumb with her nun's habit and yet there had been no sign of her since the wall of people had blocked the way.

"Heeeey! Index? Othinus?"

He called out for them while making a circuit of the atrium but found nothing. Wondering if they had moved to another floor, he turned toward the escalator.

That was when he noticed something.

"P-pant, pant."

Someone was leaning up against a column with a hand in the center of their flat chest. Were they a boy or a girl? Either way, the short person's cheeks were red and they were gasping for breath. There were also large beads of sweat on their forehead, suggesting they had just completed some heavy exercise.

What was this?

"H-hey, are you okay? If it's too stuffy in here with all the people, you should go rest on the benches over there."

"Pant, pant… I-I'm…I'm Ai…"

"Calm down. This country has these wonderful things known as vending machines. I know it seems wrong to have to spend 140 yen on water, but why not get something to drink before trying to talk?"

Kamijou grabbed the person's awfully warm hand and the person followed him with their head lowered.

The two of them left the area filled with brand-name shops and arrived in a vending machine corner. There, Kamijou held his phone up to the vending machine reader without thinking.

"What? Water's more expensive than a sports drink? Has the market gone crazy? Well, I guess it doesn't matter."

He bought a bottle of mineral water that was known for how well the bottle decomposed, but he was pretty sure just drinking water from the tap would be more eco-friendly. Regardless, he handed the bottle to the…

(Boy? Girl? Which is it!?)

“If you’re too dazed to drink, you should probably just go to the infirmary. That means there’s a problem with your autonomic nerves, so it’s best not to have an amateur decide how to treat it.”

“…Thanks.”

The boy took the clear bottle, removed the cap, and wrapped his hands around it. Gulping sounds soon followed.

“Phew.”

He let out a gentle breath. Even after a few gulps, he did not cough anything back up, so Kamijou decided it was not too serious.

The short boy held the plastic bottle in both hands and looked over at the line of vending machines in order to avoid looking at Kamijou. A few high school girls were gathered there and they spoke shrilly in front of a machine covered in an LCD screen. It used the hesitation in one’s finger when choosing what to buy in order to analyze the customer’s personality and search for other recommended products.

“But you don’t need to worry about me. I’m not suffering from heat stroke or dehydration.”

“It would be nice if that was something people could be so sure of.”

“It’s true. I’m sweating because I was running. …Honestly, I have to search out the Dianoid’s secrets to find a way to rescue that girl, but I ended up having to run away from those weird things right off the bat.”

“That girl? Run away?”

Kamijou’s tone dropped a bit, so the boy frantically waved a hand in front of his face and shook his head.

“A-anyway! That was only because I dislike spilling unnecessary blood and kindly let them have that victory! If I was serious, the world would come to an end! I wasn’t serious there at all!!”

“???”

“You’re doubting me, aren’t you!? I may not look it, but I’m Academy City’s #6, Aihana Etsu!”

The surrounding air seemed to shake. The boys and girls passing by clearly looked over in shock. That was the frightening power behind the name Aihana Etsu. Some people even hurried away.

That was why all the focus on “Aihana Etsu” could be divided into one of two categories: viewing him as the real deal or concluding he was a fake.

However, Kamijou soon spoke up.

“Oh, so you’re one of them. Does that mean you know Accelerator or Misaka?”

“Eh? What?”

“You don’t seem like the type to zap someone as you soon as you meet them, so I guess it doesn’t matter. …More importantly, what was that about running away?”

“……”

(Oh, no.)

This person in front of “Aihana Etsu” had skipped the stage of debating whether he was real or fake. Even if he was 100% real, this boy was not even remotely afraid of him.

(That’s District 15’s Dianoid for you! It’s like a den of monsters!!)

“Oh, right. I guess it’s rude not to introduce myself. I’m Kamijou Touma. Nice to meet you, Aihana-san.”

“Hyaaaah!!!???”

“Aihana Etsu” fell onto his butt as soon as he heard that name.

Unable to get up, he slid back along the floor.

“Um…?”

“K-Kamijou-san?” he asked in a trembling voice. “Y-you mean *the* Kamijou Touma!? The boy said to run around the city at night, knocking out even the most mighty warrior with his clenched fist and snatching up every girl in his path no matter how young or old!?”

“Oh, god… My head hurts!! This is reminding me of that world!!”

This triggered the trauma brought on by Magic God Othinus (who he now realized had been very immature) and the pointy-haired boy was left covering his head in his hands instead of making a snappy comeback.

Normally, he would have asked what had become of people’s image of him.

But the next thing he knew, Aihana Etsu had vanished into the crowd of people. Kamijou could still hear a scream, so he could tell which direction the boy had gone.

At the same time, a hard clack reached Kamijou’s ears.

All of his previous assumptions were thrown out the window.

By the time he realized it was the sound of a cane tapping on the floor, the color of his surroundings grew distorted.

A man of forty or fifty stood still, ignoring the flow of people around him. He wore the sort of comical tailcoat found in costume shops and the kind of silk hat worn by stage magicians. He even had a monocle in his right eye. The cane he held made one think of an illusionist’s stage costume more than actual ceremonial garb.

People were wearing a variety of costumes for the Christmas season, but this man was noticeably different.

Rather than changing his outfit to match the surrounding atmosphere, the surrounding atmosphere seemed to change to match his outfit.

“Hi.”

His casual voice pinned Kamijou Touma to the spot.

That man’s focus had fallen on him.

That prevented him from averting his gaze for even a moment. It was a fatal development. His physical body sent out warning signals before his instincts or experience could.

All of his previous assumptions had been blown away.

He could feel all other sounds receding from his mind.

As his senses created a world containing only the two of them, Kamijou hesitantly asked a question.

Why was he hesitant?

Not even he knew the answer to that.

“Who…are you?”

“I could name myself, but a boy with little knowledge of our side might not know what that means, you negative gap in the lattice.”

He laughed.

It was a quiet but somehow artificial-sounding laugh.

“The result of mastering 103,000 grimoires. One who began as a man yet surpassed mankind. That which lies beyond magicians. But if I were to say it in a way you would understand…”

The illusionist made his declaration.

“I am one who has gone beyond Othinus. Does that simplify things?”

In all seriousness, Kamijou briefly thought his heart had stopped.

(A Magic…God?)

Hopeless thoughts filled his mind.

(A Magic God? A Magic God just like Othinus? A Magic God at full power!? What do I do? What do I do, what do I do, what do I do, what do I do, what do I do!? Othinus was a good person. She still had some kindness in her that let us settle things after talking it out, but what if he doesn’t? What if he really is nothing but a mass of power? What do I do against a Magic God? What is he after? Can I settle this by talking it out? If I can’t, there’s nothing I can do! I never even beat Othinus! That only ended because she handed victory to me!!)

A strange heat filled his head.

Meanwhile, his surroundings were already beginning to change.

The scene around him melted and distorted. It looked like a chocolate house placed on the burner.

All the while, the Magic God remained perfectly motionless.

It was unclear if even basic concepts like walking applied to him.

“If I harm you here, it will cause some trouble for those who have built up over-complicated plans. I can’t wait to see the looks on their faces when I fill the gap and level out the lattice.”

“Wha-…?”

Kamijou was unable to say any more than that.

“*Chambord.*”

He thought he heard a whooshing sound and something jumped up from the floor in front of him. He thought it was a liquid at first, but it was actually the floor itself…or what had once been the floor. It had twisted, distorted, and formed a sharp spike which shot toward his chest like a bullet.

He immediately raised his right hand and the spike shattered.

However, that had only been a distraction.

A Magic God had control of the entire world.

“…!!!???”

By the time he noticed, it was too late.

The wall, floor, and ceiling had all melted and more than one hundred spikes approached from all 360 degrees in every direction. It looked like an inside-out hedgehog. The simple and yet frightening saturation attack seemed to mock his outstretched right hand.

But even as this occurred, countless people had to be walking about inside the Dianoid.

And the space between Kamijou and the wall was no exception.

What was going to happen to them? No, what had already happened to them?

The answer was simple.

There were holes. Gaping holes opened. The people had provided cover, but fist-sized holes opened in their chests, sides, legs, or heads and the sharp spikes passed through them. The spikes never actually tore through the flesh and blood. Instead, the flesh and bone themselves opened a path for the spikes to pass through. Ignoring the organs and skeletons of all those people, tunnels opened for the more than one hundred spikes approaching from every direction.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

Between the Lines 1

The Dianoid was the primary landmark of Academy City's District 15.

The massive hexagonal prism of a building was lit up in a variety of colors and a great commotion had already begun around it.

"What do you mean we can't get in?"

"I don't know, but the revolving doors won't budge."

"Oh, crap. The trains are stopped, too. But the last train leaves once the curfew arrives!"

The doors would not open. Neither would the windows.

In a normal building, that would not be too great a problem. In the worst case, one only needed to break the glass to escape.

But things were different with the Dianoid.

It was made of carbon fiber, carbon frames, and carbon nanotubes which all had artificial diamonds built in. Even if a dump truck crashed into the front entrance at top speed, it would not break through. Even what looked like windows or sliding screens were strong and tough enough to easily stop a handgun bullet.

"Wait. Are you sure this is just a system error? If someone messed with the air conditioning too, they could set it up so the people inside will suffocate."

One of the people in the crowd made that suggestion, but not because he was seriously worried. As proof, he had his cellphone pointed toward the Dianoid building. He would never admit it, but he had to have been filled with the somewhat inappropriate hope of becoming a hero on video sites if that did happen.

Nephthys spoke next to him.

"Well, I doubt this is so simple, but in a way, the lethality of being inside there is probably even greater than that. After all…St. Germain has begun to move."

"Eh? Wah!?"

The boy in the crowd casually glanced to the side and then shouted in absolute shock.

One could hardly blame him when the person standing next to him was a silver-haired beauty with nothing but white bandages wrapped around her brown skin. Even if costumes were common during the Christmas season, this was not normal. His modern reflexes caused him to point his phone's lens toward the source of his surprise, but her appearance was enough to make him question whether he should be filming it.

And on his other side, the High Priest split his dried skin to speak.

"Yes, but his tastes baffle me. Although it is fortunate that he does not chaotically destroy the world to the extent Othinus did and that he sees a clear division there."

"Eek! Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

The boy in the crowd could not help but scream when he saw a corpse or a mummy completely devoid of moisture standing next to him.

But by the time he thought about pointing his phone that way and by the time the others turned around to see what he was screaming about, the two Magic Gods were already gone.

The boy who had cried out for a perfectly good reason was left alone to receive those curious gazes like a clown.

Chapter 2: Chance Meeting with a Magic God and a Liar — St.Germain,and_LIAR.

At the time, Hamazura Shiage was looking up overhead.

A few seconds after some irregular shaking, the elevator's digital display unnaturally stopped at 29. The lights did not go out and red emergency lights did not activate like in the movies or dramas, but it was obvious something was wrong.

"It stopped?"

"Looks that way."

Hamazura and Stephanie were using the three meter steel Power Lifters to carry an art container, but the elevator was large enough to hold them with room to spare. It was apparently made so it could carry the contents of a small storeroom.

That may have been why no acrophobic tremble filled Hamazura's legs. The elevator was so thick and sturdy that it was hard to imagine the entire box was dangling from a wire.

Regardless…

"What are we going to do? We have to get this to the mid level TV station by the indicated time, right?"

"That's true, but do they have any right to get mad at us if we're slowed by a malfunction in the Dianoid's own facilities? Besides…"

Stephanie used her cellphone inside the giant machine she wore.

"I'm not picking up the signal from TV Orbit's broadcast, but that isn't just because we're in this box, is it?"

"You're kidding. You mean there's been a terrorist attack or something!?"

Hamazura was worried about someone else more than himself. Takitsubo, Mugino, and Kinuhata of Item were waiting inside the Dianoid. He doubted there was much that would cause them trouble, but there were always exceptions. If Academy City #4's strength was absolute, then Hamazura himself would no longer be alive.

"Teacher, can you call TV Orbit? What about email?"

"I'm not getting a response by email and the phones are on an infinite loop of hold music."

"Which means…?"

"Isn't it obvious? Until we get an explicit cancellation notification, we have no reason to quit working."

They exchanged a glance to confirm their intentions and then turned to carefully observe the elevator. After checking the walls, ceiling, lights, air conditioning fan, and everything else, they arrived at an answer.

"It looks like there's a floor panel. Look, here."

“But how do we open it?”

“We have these Power Lifters, don’t we? We break through it with the legs.”

The three meter machine stomped on the floor, but the panel did not even dent.

“The Dianoid is entirely made of carbon materials, isn’t it?” Hamazura sounded annoyed. “They use the same materials in bulletproof vests and space elevator wires.”

“Oh, honestly. Then, why don’t we burn it? Messing with a Power Lifter battery to send a high voltage current through it might work too. I’m pretty sure I’ve heard lightning is the big weak point of space elevator wires…ah!”

With a low thunk, Stephanie sank down.

Some kind of latch must have broken after the fact because the panel opened and the leg on top fell into empty space.

Stephanie frantically recovered her balance.

“That was close. And wow, this sure is the mid level. I can’t see anything below us.”

Hamazura peeked down through the rectangular hole and fear of their great height finally reached his legs.

He had pictured an elevator as a large box suspended by a wire, but he could see rails on the walls that the sides of the box fit into. He was not sure if this was normal or if it was unique to this heavy-duty elevator, but Stephanie gave an explanation.

“This is a linear elevator. Do you have any idea how far apart the lower, mid, and upper levels are? A normal pulley system would leave people waiting and cause a ton of congestion.”

The elevator shaft was surprisingly noisy. It was filled with an intermittent rumbling much like a washing machine.

“That’s probably noise from the pumps. The mid level is known as the Aqua Palace and it includes indoor pools and one of the world’s largest fountains.”

“I see. Then what do we do now?”

“Given the size of the maintenance entrances, we should be able to get out in the Power Lifters.”

“What about the container?”

“We’ll of course be escaping while carrying the thing with us. Is that a problem? The Power Lifter’s legs can grab it just as well as the arms. It doesn’t matter if we’re upside down or holding it with a single arm or leg, so let’s try some tricky acrobatics to get out of here.”

“Are you serious?” groaned Hamazura, but there was no other way out.

The situation in the TV station was unclear, but if they had been in the middle of a live broadcast, each second lost could mean greater losses than from a train accident.

They had to get the container there by the designated time no matter what it took.

Whether adult or student, they had to complete the job given to them.

Stephanie opened and closed not just the fingers of her mechanical arms; she opened it through the wrist and to the shoulder like an alligator mouth.

“For now, let’s grab the wire, make our way down to the nearest floor, and force open the door with these arms. I’ll take the lead, so you stay on standby. Let’s avoid swinging the container around until we have a route set up.”

“In movies, the elevator always recovers and comes to crush you as soon as you start working out in the shaft.”

“That’s true. Are you the kind of person who starts gleefully talking about a legendary murderer if you find yourself trapped in a mountain mansion during a blizzard? Don’t you realize the threat falls on you as much as on me?”

X X X X

The entire world changed color.

All around Kamijou Touma, more than one hundred spiked weapons shot from the walls, floor, and ceiling like an inside-out hedgehog.

Due to the Christmas season, quite a few boys and girls were walking in the area between him and the spikes.

Holes opened in all of those barriers of flesh as if clearing a path. They had not been stabbed by the spikes. Fist-sized tunnels were created in their chests, stomachs, or in the middle of their faces, but not a single drop of blood was shed. The one hundred piercing attacks passed through the center of those tunnels as they approached.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!???”

Kamijou Touma could not help but scream when he saw the overwhelming scene.

It was the psychedelically transformed world and not the immediate danger that threatened to shut down his mind.

Where was this?

Was it really the same place he had been standing just one second earlier?

Was this the same world that Magic God Othinus had thoroughly destroyed and then brought back?

His mind went blank.

He was unable to think clearly and what he needed to do so sparked and dispersed.

What if this illusionist man truly was a Magic God? What if he had the same abilities Othinus had? Kamijou had been able to persuade her. She had always contained the kindness that made that possible. But did this man? Would Kamijou have to pass through that darkness and traverse those near-infinite worlds of despair just to find out? And what if he did all that, had his mind and body left in tatters, and still found nothing? What if this man was wielding his power out of pure selfishness and had no real reason or cause for it? That

would be like crossing the desert without preparing a single drop of water. It would be the same as optimistically assuming there would be an oasis and stepping out onto the scorching sand with only the clothes on one's back. And Kamijou knew how frightening a Magic God could be. He understood the heat and length of that desert far too well to make an ignorant and reckless decision.

He could not win.

He could not.

That was true of the one hundred deadly weapons assaulting him from every direction as well as the true power of a Magic God that he would have to face if he survived.

But in the instant all those thoughts filled his mind…

"Oops."

It was a quiet voice.

By the time Kamijou realized it had come from the tailcoat man in front of him, the scenery had changed again.

The melted walls and ceiling had returned to normal.

The boys and girls walking by obeyed the normal flow of time and had no extraordinarily unnatural holes in their bodies.

The inside-out hedgehog of one hundred spikes had vanished as well.

It was as if everything Kamijou had seen had been a mistake.

(No.)

Kamijou's experience kept him from taking that optimistic path.

(I'm not going crazy and it wasn't an illusion. And there is only a single path of time. There's nothing running parallel and you can't turn back. That really happened. The scenery really did change, one hundred spikes really did shoot out, and tunnels really did open in everyone to provide a path. And after that…was a phase added in to recreate this peaceful world!?)

"This was the perfect opportunity, but it would be a shame to lose 'that'."

A voice cut off Kamijou's overheating thoughts.

The heat trapped in his body burst out in the form of sweat.

Meanwhile, the Magic God was looking elsewhere.

He showed no sign of caring about the person clenching their fist right in front of him.

" 'That' is why I am here. It would be a shame to lose my chance while dealing with this side job."

A clacking sound reached Kamijou's ears.

By the time he realized it was a cane tapping on the unscratched floor, a couple cut in between him and the Magic God.

Once they passed, the Magic God in a tailcoat was gone.

"……"

His legs were shaking.

Strength left his hips and gravity pulled him to the ground.

He could not even regulate his breathing in a proper rhythm.

"Touma, what is it!?"

"I take my eyes off you for a second and you cause a commotion? How useless."

All of a sudden, he found Index and fifteen centimeter Othinus approaching.

The "commotion" the latter mentioned did not seem to be a reference to the Magic God.

Kamijou Touma had suddenly screamed and fallen to the ground.

That was the only record that remained in this world.

"Othi…nus?"

"?"

He began hesitantly.

He turned to the one girl who he felt had spent that relevant time with him and he asked a question with an almost tearful smile on his face.

"Is this still our world?"

"What?"

"You're the one that brought this world back, so I want to hear it from you. We aren't inside some never-ending labyrinth, are we?"

X X X X

"Pant, pant."

Behind a pillar on the same floor, a pair of small hands was held to a mouth and a small butt was pressed flat against the floor. Someone else had been there. It was a boy with semi-long brown hair, a black hooded jacket, shorts, boots, a sky blue shirt with the brightness of mint ice cream, and similarly colored socks.

It was Aihana Etsu.

Despite the hands over his mouth, some of his heavy breathing was escaping between his fingers.

(What…was that?)

He could not comprehend what he had seen a moment before. People often said "seeing is believing", but was it really this much of a burden on someone's heart when they witnessed something they could not believe or had difficulty accepting?

(What in the world was that!?)

The scenery had changed entirely.

Countless spikes had shot out like spears.

The word Chambord had been spoken just before it happened, so was that its name?

To secure a path for those spears, fist-sized tunnels had opened in all of the people walking by.

And then it had all been repaired in an instant.

It had been so vivid and he would have missed it entirely had he blinked at the wrong time.

(Is that the Dianoid's secret?)

Perhaps.

Perhaps not.

(No, it doesn't matter if this isn't what I'm looking for. If I'm wandering around in the same building as that, the odds are good I'll run across it eventually.)

He had come here to pursue his missing friend.

He had even counterfeited a student ID card for Aihana Etsu, Academy City's #6 Level 5.

The friend had owned a secret hideout in the upper level apartments and a clue to her disappearance might remain there.

But…

Even so…

(Can I…keep going?)

He shook.

He swayed.

His weak self made an appearance. Whenever something happened, the very core of his being would tremble, his mind would grow blank, and the tears would flow before he could even think about stopping them. Every single mental dam would raise the white flag in an instant.

Large teardrops welled up in his eyes.

Just like with surface tension, he could only just barely keep them from trailing down his cheeks.

(Do I… Do I really have the courage to make my way further into the Dianoid when a monster like that is wandering around?)

A whispering voice told him to leave.

A tempting voice told him to give up.

You obviously won't be able to accomplish anything here. You've never stuck with anything to the end in your entire life. You always curl up, wrap your arms around your knees, and shed pathetic tears. And in the end, you give up without ever getting back on your feet. So throw in the towel here. Be satisfied that you managed to even take a stab at it. It's not like you didn't do anything. You worked hard to make it this far, so you can at least get an award for participation or effort.

At that point, a different voice flashed through his mind.

"In the end, it's all about how you look at it."

This voice did not come from within Aihana Etsu.

This was a crystallization of someone else's thoughts that had been input from without.

These were the words his friend had given to him when they would walk through the city.

"I mean, if you look at it the other way, it means you can shed tears for anyone's tragedy, right? That's nothing to be embarrassed about. In fact, I think you can be proud of it."

(…)

"Screw this."

He was still curled up on the ground.

Even so, he used the back of his hand to wipe away the tears that were on the verge of spilling down his soft cheeks. As if turning off a tap, he mentally restrained his overflowing tear glands.

He hated that he was a crybaby, but a friend had accepted that side of him.

She had said it was not wrong to shed tears when he wanted to cry. She had said that was a way of supporting someone's tragedy, a way of sharing someone's emotions, and the sign of someone who could look after others properly.

He did not know who that friend had been.

He could not imagine what she had truly been.

But he remembered her smile as she had said those words and he could not allow that to be erased or made to never have existed.

"I won't cry."

He doubted that the tears he had been praised for had been so lead colored.

Those tears had not been shed when he gave in, let go of something, and smiled in self-deprecation.

"This isn't where I'm supposed to cry."

Aihana Etsu attempted to take the first step beyond the identity he so hated.

With his back pressed against the thick pillar, he gathered strength in legs that trembled like a newborn deer and slowly stood up.

He would search for his friend.

He would track her down.

If he lost this chance, the fake student ID would be discovered. He would never be able to make an attack on the Dianoid again, so this was his first and last chance.

It did not matter if it was only a façade or if he was borrowing someone else's reputation.

For the time being, he was the #6.

He would complete this as Aihana Etsu.

He slowly exhaled and faced forward once again.

"*Hi.*"

A man in a tailcoat stood directly in front of him.

He lost even the strength he needed to continue thinking.

His mind began spinning and left reality behind.

X X X X

On the lower level of the Dianoid, the revolving doors appeared to be made of glass, but they were actually strong enough to endure a dump truck running into them at full speed. The main entrance was crowded with boys and girls trapped inside.

No amount of pushing or pulling accomplished anything, but some voices whispered amid the despair.

"At last, we have one."

"Are they going by Aihana Etsu now? Regardless, at least we have them."

Something was clearly out of place.

And it was viewing the situation from an objective perspective.

"The container has also safely entered the TV station."

"We could have created it from scratch, but I suppose retrieving an already existing one takes priority. No matter how carefully you produce it, a natural one can't be beat. And we have no intention of repeating the mistake that left Othinus wandering on the border between complete and incomplete."

They evaluated the situation.

And that evaluation adjusted a few imaginary rails.

“That leaves Kamijou Touma.”

“He could always be ignored, but we need to keep in mind what happened to Othinus.”

There may have been no real point in speaking out loud.

It may have been better to simply continue their evaluation.

“He is enough of an irregular to negotiate with a Magic God. Perhaps he should be viewed as a negative gap in the lattice.”

“He has low priority.”

But the voice continued.

It was as if they were placing extra space between a machine’s parts to prevent unexpected trouble.

“But once the current task is complete, it may be best to use any excess strength to eliminate him.”

X X X X

A great roar burst out.

The elevator’s automatic door, which resembled a sliding door made of wood, was removed from its rails and the wheels were kicked off.

“Phew. I think we can finally take a break.”

Stephanie Gorgeouspalace crawled out with surprisingly smooth motions for a Power Lifter. Next, Hamazura Shiage successfully escaped from the elevator shaft.

And they of course brought the die-like container with them.

They were in the Dianoid’s mid level. The lower level had a central atrium with small shops surrounding it like a beehive, but this floor was made to feel much more open and spacious. Perhaps due to the carbon materials, the floor looked like the wooden floor of a dojo or Japanese theatre stage more than that of a gym. Indirect lighting was provided by square paper lanterns.

The main features of the mid level were the water tanks embedded in the walls like windows, the decorative waterways unobtrusively located on the edges, and all the other decorations that were oddly reminiscent of water.

The type of people walking around was somewhat different too.

They were not dressed as fashionably as one would expect of District 15. A lot of people were casually dressed in a sweatshirt and jeans or in a long wrinkled skirt and a turtleneck.

“It looks like we came out in the TV station side.”

“What?”

“I mentioned how the mid level is divided between TV Orbit’s offices and the indoor services like the viewing platform and pool, right?”

“Oh, right. And we were using an elevator connected to the staff parking lot. That makes it feel like we used a secret vertical tunnel created so the entertainers can leave without being seen.”

“Let’s go check in as visitors at the gate and deliver the container.”

“Yeah, it looks like there’s a bit of a commotion going on right now.”

The gate was not far from the elevator hall. A cheap revolving door was made from two poles crossing each other and two guards wearing navy blue uniforms stood to the side. The general reception desk must have been on a different floor because there was not a receptionist or a counter here.

Their Power Lifters could have easily broken through, but there had been a checkpoint on the way to the “secret vertical tunnel”, so they would only have been here had they been trusted. It was no different from how strict security was for an international flight and yet there was no conflict between passengers after they had passed through the gate.

“Hi there. We have a container for Producer Endou of Hysterical Prize Quiz. Do you want to scan the contents?”

After Stephanie spoke with the guards for a bit, they opened the delivery gate located next to the revolving door. Some younger men arrived pushing some kind of monstrous dolly, so it was time to leave things to them. They gently placed the die-like container on the dolly, secured it, and signed a document saying they had handed over the container.

“Thank you very much,” said one of the guards with a bow.

“Sure. By the way, do you know what’s going on outside?”

“Outside?”

The guard looked puzzled, so Stephanie smiled and waved one of the Power Lifter’s giant arms.

“Oh, sorry. We were just trapped in the elevator, so I felt like asking. If the elevator doesn’t start back up, we’ll have to take the stairs down. Of course, we’ve got the Power Lifters, so it won’t be some hellish mountain descent or anything.”

As soon as she said that, a young woman spoke up. She wore a cardigan over a long dress and seemed to work on the production rather than as an entertainer.

“Wow, they really sent in something amazing. Is that special equipment for Anti-Skill or Judgment? Well, it doesn’t matter. If you’ve got those big things, can you hurry up and do something about this?”

Confused, Stephanie answered the woman’s question with a question of her own.

“What’s going on? A rampaging esper? Or did some celebrity’s fierce pet get loose?”

“You really don’t know what’s going on, do you? I’m talking about the exits. For some reason, they’re all sealed up. Not only are the elevators out of order, but we can’t open the door to the emergency stairs.”

The woman must not have left the office for several days because her hair gave off a very feminine scent as she continued in annoyance.

“It isn’t that it’s locked or the electronics are on the fritz. Whether it’s the hinges or the rails, some part has *melted and fused together*. They won’t budge no matter how much we push or pull. The lights for the elevator won’t even come on, so I have a feeling the entire building is locked down like this.”

“I see.”

“You have no idea what she means, do you?”

Hamazura cut in, but Stephanie completely ignored him.

The woman in a dress continued from there.

“You destroyed the elevator door earlier, didn’t you? Can you do the same thing to break open the door keeping us out of the emergency staircase?”

Hamazura and Stephanie exchanged a glance.

“Everything in the Dianoid is made out of ridiculously sturdy carbon materials, isn’t it?”

“Oh, crap. I bet even the emergency doors are made overly solid here. Will these Power Lifters even be enough to break through?”

They trudged over in the machines to check.

The young men and women clogging up the corridor by the door parted like the Red Sea as they approached. (Although that was entirely due to the impressive-looking Power Lifters.) Their looks of hope were probably a result of how helpless they had been before.

The mid level approximately covered the area from the twentieth to the fortieth floor.

With the elevators and stairs blocked off, there was nothing they could do. Breaking a window and escaping that way would not be easy. Unlike in the movies, no one would want to brave the harsh winds and climb down the outer wall with an unreliable lifeline in hand.

Even climbing down the stairs from this height was somewhat hopeless, but they could not just continue waiting for the elevators that might not begin working again.

Whether they would actually use the emergency stairs or not, they needed to try to open that door first.

If they did get it open, they could relax as they waited for the elevators to recover. It would provide some mental leeway.

However…

“Huh? Oh, damn! This thing won’t budge at all!!”

“Stop! Wait, teacher! The arm cylinders are making a grinding noise and Aneri is warning that you’ll burn them out if you keep that up!”

To sum up, no amount of pushing, pulling, or hitting accomplished anything.

They could not even dent the door, much less break through it.

It did not matter how much they slammed their steel fists into it.

“That’s carbon for you. I feel like nothing could be stronger or sturdier.”

“And it looks just like a normal sliding door made of wood.”

The disappointment in Hamazura’s voice quickly spread through the surrounding air. No one called them useless or threw stones, but the way the focus on them scattered was a lot like a silent protest.

This was awkward for lower class Hamazura, but he had other things to worry about.

He traced the Power Lifter’s thick steel fingers over the emergency door.

“What even caused this? From what we’ve heard, it doesn’t sound like an accident.”

“Are you saying someone did this?”

“But if they did, why did they want to trap us here?”

“That’s the question. And I doubt they can keep us confined here for long.”

“?”

“As I said before, carbon materials are weak to fire or high-voltage electricity. These doors may not budge even if we punch, kick, and drive a dump truck into them, but once Anti-Skill notices something’s wrong they should be able to bring in an acetylene torch and burn their way through the door from outside. I’d rather not set the building on fire when we don’t know if the firefighters are coming, so I’m not about to try that in here, though.”

There was no reason to stay by the emergency door they could not break, so they looked away from it.

“So do they only need to buy a little bit of time? Will they be able to accomplish whatever their goal is in just this short time?”

“What a pain,” said Stephanie.

Not even the negative ion effect created by the waterway’s small waterfalls was enough to calm them now.

The stairs and the elevator were out which left only a single route: the elevator door they had broken and the elevator shaft beyond it.

Climbing up or down it with flesh-and-blood arms and legs would have been suicide, but they had the strength of the Power Lifters.

“Fortunately, we managed to deliver the container, but it isn’t over until we get out of here, so we need to create an escape route if at all possible.”

“I had a feeling you’d say that.”

They decided on that as they returned the way they had come.

Hamazura sounded noncommittal because some of his friends had come to the Dianoid.

They were also on the mid level, but the TV station was not connected to the viewing platform. That was to prevent people from ambushing the entertainers. If he wanted to meet up with Takitsubo and the others, he

would have to first make his way to the lower or upper level or search out a secret tunnel in the mid level itself. Either way, it would require a lot of work.

They could not use the elevator or the stairs at the moment, but they could use the Power Lifters to climb up or down the elevator shaft.

Still, they were only borrowing the machines for their work.

It was hard to suggest to Stephanie that they should use them for something else.

“Hamazura.”

“What?”

A single path to freedom lay open before them.

Stephanie spoke from a step in front of the elevator shaft.

“I’m sure you already know this, but this equipment is not our personal property. Even if they’re civilian equipment that doesn’t require a license, you can still kill someone if you use them wrong.”

He prepared to say he understood, but she cut him off.

“But to keep safety a top priority and to nip any trouble in the bud, we need to quickly eliminate anything that could affect the efficiency of our work. Even if it has no direct connection to our job.”

He had no words.

Dumbfounded, he looked up at his boss and saw a teasing smile on her lips.

“With this much confusion, no one’s going to check carefully enough to see we took a bit of a detour. I doubt anyone back in District 2 is monitoring our actions while we’re trapped inside the Dianoid.”

“Eh? But…”

“Oh, c’mon! It’s not like you just want to meet up with them to have some fun, right? Go check to make sure they’re okay and then get back to work! I’ll take the Power Lifters back to District 2, but you need to at least get yours back to the truck in the parking lot!!”

Stephanie slapped him on the back.

However, she seemed to have forgotten she was using a Power Lifter that could pick up an air freight container in one hand.

Hamazura was peering into the open elevator shaft through the door they had broken through, so what would happen when someone struck him on the back?

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

He flipped upside down and fell.

The culprit scratched her head with the hand holding a cable-connected joystick and she gave an irresponsible sigh.

“Ahh, ahh. You give that guy an opportunity and he wastes it.”

X X X X

It was an odd situation.

The elevators and stairs were sealed off and everyone was trapped on the mid level floor. The worried people meaninglessly rushed toward the exits, but no one tried to actually touch them once they realized they had been tampered with. As a result, they were packed in tightly enough that they could all topple over like dominoes at any time and yet a gap remained around the closed emergency exit.

Even with all the noisy people around her, Takitsubo Rikou's eyes still wandered aimlessly.

Mugino Shizuri and Kinuhata Saiai were speaking in front of her.

"I checked the joints on the emergency exit and they've all been super fused. It isn't just locked and it doesn't just have furniture piled up on the other side. The gaps have been filled to create a solid wall."

"So did an esper do this?"

"At this stage, it could still be a type of technology, but either way, this feels super intentional. I don't know who did it or why, but don't super rich people use the Dianoid as a vault because of its solid construction? Especially in the apartments on the top level. Those didn't feel like a place for people to actually live."

"Yeah." Mugino sounded like she was vaguely recalling something. "Didn't Frenda have a hideout there?"

"She probably thought it was a secret, but it was super obvious. So do you think it was for some kind of side business? She had decent chemistry skills from her explosives, but she didn't seem like the type to touch either uppers or downers."

"She was so suspicious she wouldn't even take cold medicine, so she wouldn't have been making anything like 'rock candy'. It was probably a test plant for new explosives."

That was dangerous enough in and of itself, but it was not enough to shock Item.

They were taking a break from working at the moment, but they still mostly belonged on the darker side of things.

Takitsubo tilted her head and asked a question with her eyes still wandering aimlessly.

"What are we going to do, Mugino?"

"It doesn't really matter. I have no interest in breaking into a vault. We need to make up our mind, but I see two real options here. The first is to find Hamazura who's probably somewhere else on the mid level."

"What's the super second one?"

"To create an escape route ahead of time. Like this for example."

As she spoke, Mugino casually held out a hand horizontally.

A moment later, a brilliant beam of light surged outward and tore through the Dianoid wall that could withstand a direct hit from a battleship's gun.

This was Academy City's #4 Level 5, Meltdowner.

The ultra high firepower strike prevented electrons from taking on the properties of a wave or a particle and fired them as-is. The emergency exit and the surrounding wall were transformed into a perfectly circular hole two meters across. The edges were a scorching orange and there was no hint of what had happened to the materials that had previously formed the inside of the circle. The sight almost seemed to ignore the fundamental law of conservation of mass.

The surrounding noise had already quieted down.

First, the general pressure of being trapped inside a giant building had been overpowered by their direct fear of Mugino Shizuri for having instantly melted the carbon materials.

Second, the exit had finally opened, but no one wanted to approach it when the edges of the perfect circle were still heated to orange.

And third…

With a sound like a rope being stretched until it nearly broke, countless lines shot horizontally and vertically across the still scorching hole to form a lattice.

Their path to freedom had not remained open for even five seconds.

The building materials oozed out and spread further as they began to repair the wall.

"?"

With a girly tilt of the head, Mugino fired a second shot.

From there, she fired a third, fourth, fifth, and sixth.

"W-wait, wait, wait! Mugino, wait!"

"You're shooting way too much! Mugino, that's way too super much!! And why do I have to take over Hamazura's role as your brakes!?"

"But it regenerated."

"Mugino, that isn't an excuse."

"And stop super pouting your lips! Everyone around us is ultra freaked out! Try to read the atmosphere!!"

"Nitrogen girl is telling me to read the atmosphere? Heh heh heh. You're really risking it with that one."

"Ahh! This is getting to be too much for me to handle! Don't you get what's going on here!?"

Kinuhata's blood vessels bulged out on her face and Mugino grabbed her forehead to hold her back.

Track suit wearing Takitsubo spoke blankly.

"What do we do now?"

"We have two options. First, we can give up on escaping. We'll find Hamazura, search for some way out of this, and see if the bastard who caused this is inside the Dianoid somewhere."

"What's the super second one?"

"That's obvious."

Kinuhata regretted her question once she realized this was going the same as last time she asked, but it was too late.

She heard multiple sounds much like light filling a neon tube.

Yes, multiple.

Ten to twenty fist-sized lights hovered around the #4.

"We continue trying to make an escape route. For example, we can see just where this thing's saturation level is."

A moment later, she provided an encore presentation.

One of the Dianoid's walls was left riddle with holes.

X X X X

He did not think she had any real allergies, but the friend in his memories had insisted on never taking even cold medicine.

"No, I'm fine, I'm fine! Sleeping's enough to get over a cold, so I don't need that bitter stuff. Medicine works quickly, but it lowers your body's overall capacity instead. It's like something that recovers HP but shrinks the max HP bar. I don't even need to explain why antibiotics are dangerous, do I?"

Then why was all that canned food okay?

"In the end, any real canned good is given heat treatment and sealed so germs can't grow. Cheap ones are a different story, but normally, no chemicals are needed to sterilize, preserve, and store the food. And that's why canned mackerel is the best. Got it?"

She had all her arguments ready, but he was pretty sure she simply did not like the medicine because it was bitter.

"Ugh…"

A groan escaped Aihana Etsu's small mouth.

The first thing he felt was a stabbing chill. His eyelids parted a bit and he sensed a vague light. He was seeing District 15's night sky. The normal starlight had been swept away and the lights of all the buildings and bright decorations reflected back down at him.

But why was he outside?

Hadn't he been inside the Dianoid?

Without an answer to his questions, he slowly sat up.

(Where am I?)

He could not remember how he had passed out. He only had a feeling he had run across something incredibly sinister that he could not afford to forget.

"…"

He was in a gray garden covered in fine gravel. Short pine, maple, and cherry trees were planted there and a vermilion lacquered bridge crossed a small pond. He had been lying on a bench located below a large paper umbrella which looked like the storefront to a Kyoto teahouse.

This mismatch with high-tech Academy City confused him further, but a certain possibility soon occurred to him.

"Is this the Dianoid's roof?"

And…

A man in a tailcoat sat next to him on the bench.

"Hi."

"…!!!???"

He frantically tried to move away but only managed to fall from the bench and land on his butt. From there, he tried to scoot himself back with his hands.

(I remember.)

(I remember, I remember, I remember!!)

The floor, walls, and ceiling had all bent into over one hundred blades like an inside-out hedgehog and this man had used that strange world to skewer a certain boy. To attack with maximum efficiency, this monster had opened fist-sized tunnels in the flesh of the crowd in between and sent the blades through them.

The man laughed as he spoke.

"You certainly are afraid. Is this just like how large jewels are often said to be cursed? Well, I believe I am generous enough to view your fear as awe towards a higher being."

"Ah, aahh, aaahhh…"

Aihana Etsu placed a hand in the center of his flat chest and trembled.

The monster looked down at the small teary-eyed individual, but he maintained his soft gentle smile.

“You fainted due to mental shock instead of dehydration and you clearly have plenty of energy left, but why not drink something regardless?”

A 250 mL drink bottle had appeared in the man’s hand at some point. It was about the size of an apple, but where had it come from? Aihana Etsu was not even sure of that.

(Another drink. Do I look that susceptible to heatstroke?)

Still sitting on the ground, he glanced toward the bottle of mineral water the man had set on the bench. Suddenly, the man in a tailcoat and overcoat had something else in his hand.

It was the kind of rectangular translucent container used to hold mint pills. But when the man shook the pill case, an incredibly old-fashioned kind of black pill came out.

“I do not need normal food. As long as I have water and wheat, I do not age. Thanks to that, people have mistakenly assumed I secretly possess the philosopher’s stone.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

“Well, to be honest, I am not what matters here. That would be you.”

Having focus casually turned his way, Aihana Etsu felt sweat flowing down his small face.

His nerves threw off the rhythm of his breathing. As his breaths escaped from between his lips, they mixed with the cold night air and grew visually white.

He did not know who this man was, but he was a true monster. It was immediately obvious this man was not the same as “Aihana Etsu” who had only been able to fake a student ID card. As someone who “had nothing”, he could tell. The presence prickling at his skin was too great. What could this monster want? Did he have business with “Aihana Etsu”? Or was it with his true self hidden below the disguise?

“There are a few reasons why I am here, but one of them is you. And this is one of the higher priority reasons, too. Yes, I am here to see you.”

If that was all, Aihana Etsu might have thought the man was just a creepy stalker, but things were different here.

On a fundamental level, something threatened to cut down the very base of his existence.

His heart rather than his head told him being in this man’s sights was very, very bad.

“I-I…”

“Yes?”

“I don’t know you.”

“You wouldn’t, no. This is the first time I have directly met you.”

The man slowly spoke as he tossed the pill into his mouth.

“But that does not really matter.”

“?”

“Technically speaking, you could say what I am after is you and yet not you.”

“What…does that mean?”

“You don’t know?”

The man smiled with eyes that sparkled more bewitchingly than moonlight, but there was no smile to be found deep inside them.

“ ‘Aihana Etsu’ does not matter here. What I am interested in is you. And do you really not know what it is you hold?”

“…?”

The title of “Aihana Etsu” was falling away.

This should have been a deadly situation, but the sense of danger was vanishing behind the emptiness in his thoughts.

With a monster on this level, this would not just be for show, on a whim, or a mistake.

But if this was the truth, where was that truth?

“Aihana Etsu” had nothing. It was his painful awareness of that fact that had led him to use a fake ID to get into the Dianoid. And all to find and rescue Frenda Seivelun who had vanished after being swallowed up by the city’s darkness.

What did this man see in him?

What did he have that would make such a monster turn his way?

“If you truly do not understand, I am willing to explain. In fact, I have lived for centuries to do just that. But where to begin? I could just say everything has gone according to plan, but at the same time, it seems there has been a fair bit of contamination. It feels like I’m looking at a stone coated with finger grease.”

“What…What are you saying I have?”

“I am saying…”

The man trailed off as the entire Dianoid building shook again and again.

Aihana Etsu let out a short shriek while still sitting on the ground.

He felt like he was on an unreliable suspension bridge. It certainly did not feel like the roof of a giant building supported by cutting-edge technology.

The man slowly looked up into the sky while still sitting on the bench.

“It would seem a new problem has arisen.”

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wha-!?”

“Do not worry about it. It is only the base isolation causing it to shake so much. It is supposed to do this.”

The man’s expression remained calm.

An explosive roar came from within the building each time it shook, but he showed no sign of caring. He seemed to use his indifference toward each new situation to show off how different he was from "Aihana Etsu".

"Well, *I can deal with that one later.* First, I need the shield that produces a positive gap. If things are going as planned, it should be reaching the TV station right about now. I could always make it from scratch, but that really would be too boring."

"???"

His words were probably not meant for "Aihana Etsu".

The boy could not understand any of it.

He did not need to reply or smile politely. These words were isolated in that man's own world.

He was the opposite of "Aihana Etsu".

"I would have liked to stay here to chat, but it would be no fun if the shield was hit by a stray shot. I will be going. Until we meet again, Gap of Anne."

"Gap? Anne? What?"

"You do not have time to sit around and chat either, do you?"

The man stood up from the teahouse storefront bench so smoothly that it barely looked like the movement was produced by bending joints.

"You had a reason for falsifying your identity to get here, didn't you? If you do not hurry, you will miss your one chance. It seems the sturdy structure of the Dianoid means nothing to the residents of this city and you don't want the last vestiges of Frenda Seivelun to slip through your fingers, do you?"

When he heard that, Aihana Etsu thought his heart was going to stop.

Not because the man suggested the Dianoid could collapse.

Not because the man knew he had a goal here in the Dianoid.

Not even because the man had gotten his friend's name right in one shot.

"*The last vestiges*?"

His eyes opened wide.

All of the previous conditions left his mind and he snapped back at the man.

"You said the last vestiges of Frenda Seivelun, didn't you!? You mean she's…she's already…!!"

"I am not the one to discuss that with."

"Then who are you!? How much do you know!?"

"I will tell you that eventually. I promise."

The man sounded as casual as someone arranging to eat dinner together sometime.

As soon as he finished, a portion of the bench jutted sharply out.

With a sticky sound, it twisted, sharpened, split off from the furniture, and formed a spear in the man's hand.

This was what the man had called Chambord.

He rested the strange object on his shoulder and turned his back on Aihana Etsu.

"I will help you just this once. My top priority is retrieving the shield from the TV station, but I will make a detour on the way there. I will make sure the Dianoid does not collapse before you find a certain secret. The rest is up to you. Use your own strength to reach the truth hiding in this labyrinth."

"…"

"Also, the doors and elevators leading outside are sealed, but I will remove that restriction for you. You can move to any floor you want to achieve your goal."

The man in a tailcoat continued speaking.

"In return, I must insist you hear me out once this is all over. You can do that much, can't you?"

"You…"

Aihana Etsu gathered his thoughts even as he opened his mouth to speak, so his question ended up being quite vague.

"Who even are you?"

"Come to think of it, I never introduced myself. I have been called the one who understands the rules of life and has achieved immortality. I have been called a time traveler. I have been called a technician who can restore broken jewels. I have been called a number of things in legend, but…"

The man turned back with a truly childish smile on his face.

"My name is St. Germain. I am one of those who have surpassed the mere magician. I would appreciate it if you could remember that."

X X X X

"…"

Kamijou Touma sank to the floor in front of Index and fifteen centimeter Othinus.

He worried over the issue for a while.

He could not even decide where to begin.

The situation was just that unreasonable.

He felt overwhelming despair.

Finally, he slowly looked up and began.

"A Magic God has shown up."

"What?"

"I know you're skeptical. But I want to ask something first. Othinus, are there other Magic Gods besides you? Or did you stand at the top of the world?"

"Well… Theoretically, there could be more than one." Othinus let out a small breath. "It's nothing more than a final destination reachable by human means. It could be Indian mythology, Buddhism, Greek mythology, Maya, Voodoo, or in this country, Shinto or Shugendo. If people mastered those paths to the very end, it could lead to a few different Magic Gods."

Othinus's hand looked delicate enough to break if someone touched it, but she used it to point her thumb at Index.

Yes, the 103,000 grimoires inside Index's head had the additional value of allowing one to reach the position of a Magic God if used properly. Whether that was true or not, the entire magic side viewed a Magic God as an elusive position much like grasping a cloud, but it was also a realistic enough dream that someone was sure to pull it off eventually.

In that case, what was that man in a tailcoat?

Was he really a Magic God who had bloomed some other way than Othinus?

Kamijou's face was pale, but Othinus did not hesitate to speak to him.

"But have you forgotten? How many digits' worth of worlds do you think I made and remade when I was settling things with you? If an equal Magic God existed in this world and this age, they would have interfered back then."

"You mean…?"

"At the very least, there wasn't a Magic God *in this world*. Doesn't that seem like a reasonable conclusion?"

Othinus was right.

She should have been right.

But some uneasiness lingered in Kamijou's heart. He felt an intense refusal toward thinking the colorful hell that man had demonstrated was only an illusion meant to look like the world was being bent to his will. His deepest thoughts were telling him it would come back to bite him if he conveniently and optimistically averted his gaze from that harsh reality.

That may have been a sense he alone possessed after learning firsthand what a true Magic God was like.

(But…)

If he had not stopped himself, he might have started chewing on his thumbnail.

(What if that is real? What do I do then? Do I have to go through all that again? Do I have to wait for him to break? But this Magic God might not have a single speck of kindness inside him! That's no different from being told to search Mars's deserts for a single grain of gold dust that might not even be there!!)

If that man truly was a full-power Magic God, he could remake the world even faster than snapping his fingers.

In fact, this world that Kamijou thought was “real” might have already been replaced by a very similar world.

He had to neutralize this opponent no matter what, but he could not afford to provoke him either.

It was as unreasonable as being told to remove the very bottom layer of a pyramid of cards because it was “in the way”.

Was destruction the only option remaining?

This was the same path as before. Would he have to smash the world to pieces and redo everything from that pitch-black place?

“…”

Still sitting on the floor, Kamijou glanced around.

He felt the heated air and saw the soft Japanese lights. Normal boys and girls walked around. The calico cat, Othinus, and Index stood nearby. After looking at each of them in turn, he silently and slowly shook his head.

He could not do it.

He could not allow it to happen.

But at the same time, he could not ignore this. At the very least, that man in the tailcoat was hostile towards Kamijou. Everything had been preserved by some fluke, but that man would surely attack again after finishing whatever task he had to complete.

And if they clashed one-on-one, the Magic God would mercilessly destroy the world. He would create a world convenient to his purposes and slaughter Kamijou in a perfect game.

Kamijou did not know if it was possible, but he had to settle this before the Magic God could snap his fingers.

If he did not switch this off in an instant, the world would end.

Until he could find a way to do that, even a careless attack would be a crime.

(What should I do?)

In Denmark, when the world had attacked to finish off Othinus in her weakened state, the unfairness of it all had enraged him.

But when looking at it from the outside, he could understand.

The earth, the universe, and the world were nothing but a giant balloon. And a Magic God was a potted cactus wobbling on top of the balloon. That would cause anyone to panic. Once one learned of its existence, they would be worried around the clock that the cactus would eventually topple over as it moved freely about.

(Unrealistic ideals don’t matter. What exactly are you supposed to do against a monster like that!?)

It was absolute overkill.

It went far beyond an overflow error.

Meanwhile, Kamijou merely knew the Magic God named Othinus. Just because you could brag that you were friends with an entertainer did not mean you could put on a show in front of the camera. If he confronted this man, he would lose. He had to deal with this as quickly as possible, but the situation was so bleak that eternally putting it off until later almost seemed like the best option.

“What are you thinking about?” asked the small Othinus. “Are you trying to keep everything to yourself like usual?”

“I wish I could,” he spat back with a weight to his voice. “But I can’t. This time, I really can’t. Othinus, I know it’s cruel to ask a former Magic God this, but how do you defeat a Magic God? I’m not talking about tearfully begging them to stop. Is there a specific way to truly defeat one?”

“Hmph.”

She seemed annoyed that he was still talking about that.

She answered him regardless, but that may have been like a parent teaching some “magic words” to a child who had just had a bad dream.

“Ollerus used a fairy spell. It was slow, but it conflicted with Gungnir and began destroying my body from within. Used right, it could be transformed into a technique to kill a Magic God.”

But during that time, she had destroyed the world more times than she had bothered to count.

That method would still require a confrontation in that pitch-black hell.

“Anything else? Is there any way to end this without the world being destroyed even once?”

“That’s a tall order. You’re basically asking for a way to rampage around an elaborate setup of dominoes without knocking even one of them over. With someone on the level of a Magic God, a fight that doesn’t destroy the world would be the exception.”

Those words filled his vision with darkness.

But he could not afford to stop here. This man was already his enemy and allowing the man to attack first would only make matters worse. That remained true even with the astronomical difference between human and Magic God.

He could not image how attacking first would allow him to win, but if that man attacked first, the odds of his victory dropped to exactly 0.00%.

“This could not be worse,” he muttered while slowly standing.

He felt entirely unmotivated, but he knew he would ultimately end up in tears if he did not take the initiative. No matter how reckless it was, he had to take action.

He grabbed the atrium railing for support and faced the two girls.

“Index.”

“What?”

“I know this won’t be easy, but I want you to analyze him as much as possible. Help me out with your memory. And Othinus?”

“Tell me what you want, human.”

“You’ve rejected the possibility, but it’s possible the 103,000 grimoires *won’t be enough* for this opponent. So you come with me. You actually became a Magic God, so the odds are good you’ll be able to tell if he’s the real deal, right?”

Slowly but surely, he put his mind to work and figured out what he needed to do.

The situation was no different than with the normal magicians he had faced in the past. He forced himself to assume that. He temporarily set aside how far beyond that this went. He would covertly observe the Magic God and have specialists analyze the spells and spiritual items he was using. If that turned up a weakness, that was great. At the very least, he wanted to know if he could use Imagine Breaker here and what he had to destroy to improve the situation.

Of course, there was a definite chance that they would investigate everything and reach the hopeless answer of “He doesn’t have a single weakness.”

“Okay.”

He forced the situation into that pattern and tried to fall into his usual routine. If he did not, he was sure he would simply fall to his knees and laugh uncontrollably.

At that moment, he did something.

Not even he knew why.

He suddenly glanced upwards while still holding the atrium railing.

One of the decorative flat-screen monitors of the Dianoid’s lower level was installed there and it was playing a TV Orbit behind-the-scenes video that had been filmed after the trouble began. Simply put, a staff member like an AD had used a small camera to film the mid level.

It was more like a documentary than a behind-the-scenes video.

The monitor displayed staff members running around the TV station in a panic since the elevators and stairs were blocked off. It also showed footage from the viewing platform and indoor pool. The TV station and the viewing platform were supposedly not physically connected, but there may have been hidden doors for VIPs to pass through.

However, none of that was what mattered.

Kamijou saw something on that monitor that instantly destroyed all of his assumptions.

“This isn’t good.”

“What is it, Touma?”

He did not even have time to answer Index’s question.

“This really isn’t good! Damn him!!”

By the time he let out that shout, he had already started running.

X X X X

After Stephanie Gorgeouspalace (carelessly) pushed him down the elevator shaft, Hamazura Shiage managed to catch something protruding from the wall using his steel arm.

If this had not been the ultra-sturdy Dianoid, he probably would have broken the object right off of the wall and continued on down.

Unpleasant sweat covered his face as he dangled down.

However, that *was not* because the sudden fall was squeezing at his heart.

"…"

He had heard footsteps.

A pair of legs walked right by the elevator door without realizing it was cracked open. They belonged to a strange man who wore a tailcoat and a monocle.

But where had he come from?

If Hamazura's memory was accurate, a giant elevator had lowered down just a moment earlier.

Supposedly, no one could use the stairs or elevators, so why was this man an exception?

(And…)

Hamazura thought while supporting himself with a single arm.

(What was that spear?)

The man had rested a spear on his shoulder.

But that had not seemed logical. For one, he did not know what material it was made from. It did not look like metal or glass fiber. It gave the immediate but eerie impression of being made by melting, forcibly twisting, and sharpening a piece of the Dianoid itself.

The problem was not how sharp the spear was.

The problem was how quickly and casually it seemed to have been created.

The words "St. Germain" were carved into the side.

Hamazura briefly hesitated over how to read it, but he soon made an odd connection. He only figured it out because there was a brand of motorcycle wheels named St. Germain. What it actually meant was still a mystery to him.

But hadn't someone said that all of the Dianoid's exits had been sealed to trap everyone inside? And instead of just locking the doors or placing something heavy in their way, hadn't the hinges or locks been melted and fused?

In that case, what did that spear mean?

(Is that the same technique? So is this guy behind it all?)

Aneri, the support system originally placed inside the military Dragon Rider, used the AUD to place a warning in Hamazura's vision.

Threat level: undetermined.

Recommend hiding.

That strange warning was much worse for his heart than a direct announcement of danger.

And another coincidence followed.

A tremendous tremor ran through the floor. Hamazura's mechanical arm was very nearly thrown from the wall. His stomach grew cold, but at the same time, he wondered just how many people were capable of enough direct damage to shake the Dianoid.

Only one immediately came to mind.

(Mugino?)

And if she was there…

(Are Kinuhata and Takitsubo nearby too!?)

He heard more footsteps.

Even an idiot could tell where they were headed. Whatever his goal might be, the man behind this would want to keep the people trapped inside the Dianoid. So what if a group among them threatened to change that? He would obviously want to silence them immediately.

Hamazura knew Mugino Shizuri was not easily defeated.

Takitsubo Rikou might not be able to help with her full power, but Kinuhata Saiai was formidable too.

However, there were no absolutes.

Hamazura himself had been saved by that kind of unreasonable miracle on more than one occasion.

But before that…

(This isn't about how strong or weak anyone is.)

He tightened his steel grip on the wall.

(I'm sick of having all these dangerous people go after them!!)

He prepared to use the two cable-connected joysticks and the two foot pedals in order to jump upwards.

The man was defenseless at the moment, so Hamazura might be able to knock him out with a surprise attack using the steel arms.

Or so he thought.

It turned out he was being naïve.

A deafening sound reached his ears.

A moment later, a pointy-haired boy *fell from directly above*, poured his full weight into a flying kick at the back-worn unit of the Power Lifter, and finally tore Hamazura's steel arm from the elevator shaft wall.

He did not even have time to cry out.

In no time, he was bound by gravity and the two boys fell together.

X X X X

Stepping back in time a bit, Kamijou Touma saw Hamazura and the Magic God on the behind-the-scenes video displayed on a flat-screen monitor.

Immediately afterwards, he took off running.

If Hamazura carelessly contacted that Magic God, the world truly could come to an end.

To ensure that did not happen, Kamijou had to prevent them from meeting.

He began by checking on the general situation.

He pressed the elevator button and ran to the emergency staircase door, but there was nothing he could do there. He touched the melted and fused rails and lock for the sliding door, but they had already solidified and Imagine Breaker did nothing.

"Dammit! I had a feeling that wouldn't work!!"

He let out a shout without thinking, but he was still surrounded by unhappy boys and girls. His shout of displeasure was drowned out by all the other complaints.

Keeping at this would not help, so he switched over to a new train of thought. He ran to a magazine stand and roughly grabbed a pamphlet on the Dianoid. He glanced through it, but the structure of the building was kept vague enough to not provide any hints to terrorists.

The mid level's viewing platform was known as the Aqua Palace.

It had a lot of water art and contained one of the world's largest fountains.

"I guess that's the only option…"

He glanced around, looked down through the atrium, and spotted the shop he wanted.

"Touma, Touma! What are you doing!?"

"I don't have time to explain. Just come with me!"

He placed Othinus on his shoulder and dragged Index with him as he ran to a sporting goods store.

With all the brand-name shops, he had been worried, but the item he needed had a surprisingly normal price.

“What are you going to do with that?” asked the small Othinus.

“I need to get to the mid level’s viewing platform somehow and I need this to do it.”

He already knew where he had to go.

The elevators and emergency stairs were sealed, but the doors to the indoor shops and the escalators were fine. He ran down the stopped escalators until he reached the lowest level he could.

He finally arrived in the Dianoid’s pump room.

The wooden-looking sliding door opened surprisingly easily and he found a large group of throbbing machines inside.

With the previous purchase in hand, he let out a groan.

“This is really a bad idea.”

“Hey, explain yourself already,” demanded Othinus from his shoulder.

He answered while searching around and finding a tool box.

“I saw that Magic God on some footage of the Dianoid’s mid level. Even worse, he’s about to run into a guy I know.”

“…”

“We may have our doubts about him, but if he is a Magic God, this is really bad. I don’t want to provoke him until we know for sure, so I have to stop the guy about to run into him!”

“But you can’t use the stairs or the elevators and the escalators are isolated to the lower level. If you know there’s no way up there, why are you in the pump room?”

Kamijou pulled a monkey wrench out of the tool box, spun it around in one hand, and climbed the ladder to the top of the giant pump equipment.

“The Dianoid’s mid level is known as the Aqua Palace and it has one of the world’s largest fountains. For that and the waterways, pools, and whatever, it needs to constantly pump up several tons of water every second.”

“Wait.”

“That means the special water pipes have to be really thick. As long as I have a way to breathe, I just have to let the current carry me up.”

He pulled his purchase from the shopping bag.

It was an ultra-small diving mask with something like a hair spray can attached.

Index shouted up from the floor below.

“Touma! Are you going off somewhere on your own again!?”

“Unfortunately, I only have one mask. I couldn’t afford any more.”

He used the monkey wrench to remove the bolts holding the pump equipment's maintenance hatch closed.

"You can see what's happening on the mid level using the monitors. If I have a connection, I'll send a video with my phone's camera. And even if you don't hear anything from me, do what you can to analyze this Magic God. We can share what information we have when we manage to meet up again."

The manhole-like maintenance hatch opened with a dull sound.

A massive amount of water rushed by just below and it had the same ominous roar as a ditch on an especially rainy day.

He put on the diving mask and wrapped the rubber strap around his head.

He then lowered Othinus from his shoulder.

"To be honest, I don't see how I can do anything on my own. Index, Othinus, you're the main players here. Can I put my life in your hands?"

"Hmph. I'm just glad you didn't say you had to do this yourself."

Othinus crossed her arms and maintained her haughty tone.

"But are you sure you want to do this?"

"Hm?"

"You can use that thick water pipe if you want, but nothing says it'll be a straight path all the way up. If it happens to take a bunch of right angle turns, you'll hit them at roller coaster speeds and end up like a stone thrown into the curve of a river."

"Eh? Wai-.."

Kamijou tried to throw on the brakes, but his feet slipped on the water that had splashed up from the maintenance hatch.

By the time he felt his vision rotate around, he had already been thrown into the maintenance hatch back-first.

"Bshhh. S-s-s-such misfortuuuuuuuuuuunnnnnnnnnnne!?"

He did not know what kind of route the pipe took.

There had been no room for his own will to influence any of it.

After feeling a great roar in his heart, he was thrown "outside". After a five meter sensation of floating, he felt himself break through the water and realized he was still alive.

"G-gasp! Bshfh!! Bshfsh!!!"

He gasped for breath to a disturbing degree and looked around. He was waist high in water. The ceiling was far overhead and the area was brightly lit. He had apparently been spat out the mouth of a giant lion connected to an indoor pool. It saddened him to see the rich young ladies in bikinis staring at him in fear.

He tore off the diving mask, climbed up onto the poolside, and thought to himself.

(I've made it to the mid level. Now I just have to figure out where Hamazura is.)

"Dammit! Please let me make it in time!!"

He ran from the pool, but something strange happened then. He found himself in the strictly guarded TV station instead of the viewing platform filled with normal people.

"Wh-what?"

The two areas were not supposed to be connected, but there must have been a hidden door for the entertainers.

And there was another oddity in the TV station's elevator hall.

One of the doors there had been broken open by some great force.

"…"

Kamijou looked down into the elevator shaft.

The great drop made his legs tremble, but he did see someone inside that darkness.

It matched the situation he had seen on the monitor in the Dianoid's lower level.

"Found you."

Kamijou Touma made a decision.

He did not have a machine like the Power Lifter or any magic that let him fly.

He did not even have a simple lifeline.

But if Hamazura Shiage and the Magic God came into contact here, he might never be able to feel that normal fear again. He might be once more thrown into that twisted golden world and crushed by that "happy" world filled with smiles.

And so the pointy-haired boy did not hesitate.

He sent himself plunging into that deep, deep pit that had to be between twenty to forty stories above the surface.

X X X X

Their meeting was sudden.

Kamijou Touma collided with the back-worn unit of Hamazura's Power Lifter.

The giant steel arm was knocked from the outcropping on the wall.

And they fell.

“Ahhhh

Kamijou did not have a definite solution. That was how much trouble this situation was giving him. He might be able to solve it all eventually, but the people Hamazura knew very well would never be able to board that final train out.

So…

"That isn't good enough," spat out Hamazura Shiage.

It was possible Kamijou had saved his life just now, but there was something he could not back down on even if that was true.

"If you don't have a way to protect them, then get out of my way. I'm not saying you're wrong. You're probably exactly right that I'll be defeated. But I still need to make sure they can escape. You watch me lose miserably and find a way to defeat that bastard."

"What if…"

Kamijou Touma did not bother with the details.

He slowly shook his head and responded.

"What if that man is powerful enough to destroy the world? I'm not talking about weighing the world against something else. This might destroy the entire world, including everything you care about. Will you still go even then?"

"Sorry."

After that quick word, he had Aneri provide him with more high performance movements.

With a roar, the Power Lifter's steel arm tore through the air.

Kamijou clenched his teeth and swung his upper body around. The massive fist missed its mark and broke through the elevator door behind the pointy-haired boy. When Kamijou realized the machine was preparing for a kick, he half-rolled out into the elevator hall to put some distance between them.

The Power Lifter slowly stepped forward.

Hamazura slammed the two steel fists together and answered the other boy.

"I don't care if this is reckless or foolish. Even if it means making them my enemy, I still want to do what I can to help them. That's all this is."

"…"

Hamazura's own words may have gone beyond what he could fully imagine.

That may have been something only Kamijou could understand.

And with that in mind, Kamijou Touma narrowed his eyes and gave his response.

He did so with a slight smile.

"I was the same."

He poured a dreadful amount of strength into his right fist.

There was no villain here. The two of them simply stood in different positions.

But that was enough.

Kamijou Touma and Hamazura Shiage.

A clash of two heroes had begun.

X X X X

The empty elevator hall provided plenty of space.

Kamijou Touma quickly assessed Hamazura's weaponry from seven to eight meters away.

(That isn't a military powered suit. Is it a minor model Power Lifter? Those things are for transporting cargo, but the arms are still a threat. If one of those grabbed me and performed a wrestling move, I'd be torn to pieces. But it isn't like it has no weaknesses. Maybe it's an issue of regulations, but he isn't protected by armor like with a powered suit. My attacks can still reach him!!)

His thinking may have been accurate, but he had fundamentally misjudged the scale of his opponent.

The Power Lifter stood three meters tall.

A distance of less than ten meters was only a step away.

The machine took a powerful step forward.

The next thing he knew, metal filled his vision.

“Kh!?”

His opponent did not try to swing his fist or grab with his monstrous fingers.

He swung the entire stabilizing leg toward Kamijou like the boy was a soccer ball. Instead of compressing the air, the action seemed to tear into the air. Kamijou immediately tried to roll to the side, but the edge of his clothes were caught.

That was enough to squeeze his torso, toss him spinning into the air, and slam him back down into the seemingly wooden floor a good distance away.

“Gbah! Cough cough! Eugh, cough!?”

(Dammit, I’m not cut out for this kind of opponent!! Isn’t this like taking on a power shovel or steamroller with nothing but your fist!?)

On top of that, he did not have time to catch his breath and put together a plan.

The three meter mass of steel ran and then jumped toward him. Kamijou was not sure whether it weighed several hundred kilograms or a full ton, but he knew what would happen if it crushed him.

(I’ll be killed instantly!!)

He desperately rolled to the side and managed to evade.

As a roar burst out, Hamazura swung the two joysticks around. The arms followed the same motions and a giant press-like palm savagely swung down.

Hamazura had predicted his action.

With his torso held between the palm and the floor, the flow of Kamijou’s blood was thrown out of whack.

“Bghueh!?”

The arm opened like an alligator mouth, grabbed the boy’s torso, and lifted him up.

It looked rough, but since this was a piece of heavy machinery, the control had to be as delicate as a robot arm picking up an egg without breaking it.

Hamazura did not bother saying anything.

He would knock Kamijou unconscious as quickly as he could. He could say everything he wanted after the other boy had passed out. His actions made that intention quite clear.

Quiet mechanical sounds of gears and cylinders came from within the metal arm.

But even as Kamijou could not move his diaphragm much and had difficulty breathing, he desperately swung his arms around. Compared to the machine arm holding his entire body, his flesh-and-blood arm seemed far too fragile.

However, the situation soon changed.

Kamijou Touma held an oxygen tank the size of a hair spray can. It was the spare for the diving mask.

And he shoved it into the metal arm's elbow joint.

The biting pressure of the joint was enough for the metal tank to burst like a balloon.

With a dry popping sound, the arm holding Kamijou stopped moving and he slipped from its grasp. The machine itself had not broken, but the sudden internal shock must have triggered a safety.

"Aneri? Respond, Aneri!! Damn!!"

Once he realized the one arm would not move in the slightest, Hamazura swung the other one.

However, Kamijou already knew what to do next.

He removed his jacket and, like a bullfighter, dodged to the side at the last possible second. The coat remained behind and got caught on the steel arm. Specifically, the moving parts of the unprotected elbow bit into it.

This stopped the other arm.

A human body would lose its sense of balance if the arms stopped moving. A common experiment had people run for fifty meters with their hands tied behind their back. That alone was enough for people to lose their balance. So what would happen when it was a heavy Power Lifter that had thrown off its center of gravity by swinging its fists with all its might?

A tremendous crash reached Kamijou's ears.

Hamazura and the Power Lifter had fallen to the floor as if from a martial arts throw. The machine lay on its side and Kamijou quickly circled to the stomach-side where Hamazura was visible.

He did not even have time to think about getting back at the other boy.

He simply planned on kicking Hamazura's solar plexus like a soccer ball to render him unconscious as quickly as possible.

However, that never panned out.

Just before the kick struck, Hamazura blocked with his flesh-and-blood arm. Ignoring the dull sound, the rollercoaster-like safety bar shot up, freeing Hamazura and sweeping away Kamijou's leg.

Kamijou was knocked onto his back and Hamazura climbed on top of him.

They rolled along the floor and swung their fists down on each other. A dull sensation filled their fists, their visions flashed in and out, the insides of their mouths split open, an iron flavor spread through their mouths, and an intense heat gathered in the ends of their noses. They continued the anaerobic exercise without time to catch their breath and their awareness of the inside and outsides of their bodies filled with the color white.

"Like I said!! Your way! Isn't enough!! To beat a Magic God!!"

"That doesn't matter! It doesn't!! If I just stick with your way, we won't make it in time for Takitsubo and the others!! They're about to run into that dangerous guy!! Right now!!"

“Don’t try to take on a Magic God when you don’t even know what one is!! Do that and you’ll end up like me!!”

“I don’t care!! I really don’t care what happens as long as I can save them!!”

Most likely, neither Kamijou Touma nor Hamazura Shiage understood what they were saying anymore.

They did not have the luxury of choosing another option and their thoughts leaked out like they had been injected with a truth serum.

They rolled over again and again, punching all the while.

(I’m sorry, Hamazura. I know you feel responsible for something important here. And it’s something important enough to piss you off when someone tells you to back down.)

Kamijou was on top. He clenched his right fist as hard as rock, clenched his teeth, and aimed for the center of Hamazura’s face.

(But leave this one to me. I can’t let you end up in that pitch-black hell!)

That was when an impact reached his thigh. Hamazura held a skinny metal part that resembled a pen. It may have been a component of the Power Lifter and the round end was buried in Kamijou’s thigh. It did not draw blood, but dull yet intense pain raced through him.

“Gah…ah!?”

Kamijou’s upper body collapsed to bear with the pain, but that proved to be a mistake. Once their heads approached, he lost the advantage of being on top. Hamazura grabbed his collar and pulled him even closer.

Then his other fist gave a howl.

Even though Hamazura could not put his hips into the blow, the direct hit to the bridge of the nose was enough to darken Kamijou’s vision. Kamijou lost his balance, so Hamazura pushed him off and began his counterattack.

And…

And…

And…

“Even if…”

At the very, very end, Hamazura Shiage had the upper hand.

His own face was beaten, swollen, and dripping with blood from the many cuts.

“Even if you’re the hero who ended World War Three and the double scorer who also ended the fight with Gremlin…”

He raised a fist dripping with blood.

Was it his or his opponent’s?

He did not know, but a smile appeared on his battered face.

“That St. Germain bastard is after the girl I fell in love with, so it’s my job to save her.”

The sound of a dreadful impact rang out.

X X X X

“…”

Kamijou Touma let out a weak breath while lying sprawled out on the floor.

He had been punched all over and a groaning pain reached him whenever he moved a joint.

Hamazura and the Power Lifter were gone. Only the jacket he had used for defense remained. After the system recovered from the errors, Hamazura had likely climbed back on and gone off to save his friends.

(Ahh…)

Unable to even cover his swollen face with his hands, Kamijou spoke blankly into the air.

“I really am weak.”

He was simply complaining.

He had not meant for anyone to hear him.

Nevertheless, someone responded.

“You should have known that from the beginning. I may have survived due to a few coincidences working in our favor, but that wasn’t because you’re especially strong.”

“Othinus?”

The doll-sized girl struck a daunting pose on the Dianoid’s floor and pointed out Kamijou’s foolishness.

“Why are you here?” he asked. “How did you get here?”

“Have you already forgotten? Nothing is impossible for a god.”

He knew that could not be the answer, so he thought about it rationally.

He had made it up to the mid level by slipping, panicking, and being sucked up and tossed around by the giant water pipe. He had not had time to focus on his senses during all that, so was it possible Othinus had used her miniature size to slip inside his diving mask just before he fell in the water?

“Wait a second. Wait just a second, Othinus. Are you saying I’m a pervert who only survived by breathing in a girl’s scent through that diving mas- gyah!?”

“Can we get back on topic, human?”

With that low comment, Othinus buried her small fist in Kamijou’s torso.

Despite being a Norse god, she seemed to know a lot about Eastern acupuncture points. An intense numbing pain raced through his body just like hitting one's funny bone. His legs stuck out straight.

"Bh! Bhfh!? O-Othinus? Were you in the middle of saying something?"

"I was. If it hadn't been for your strange interruption, I would have said this."

She gave an exasperated shrug.

"Make no mistake. If all you were was strong, I would never have been saved in Denmark."

"…"

"Your true value is different from that of a Magic God who has to determine superiority by the presence or absence of power. Isn't that right? So feeling ashamed that you lack strength is pure foolishness. Your value shows itself once you accept what you lack and think about what to do without that strength."

When he heard that, Kamijou's eyes finally narrowed softly.

He reached a hand toward Othinus and rubbed her small head with his fingertips.

"You are being too friendly, human."

"Sorry. But make sure to remind me."

Kamijou spoke without shame.

"Remind me that I too have something he can't defeat and something I can't back down on."

"Hmph."

Othinus gave a snort but let him do as he pleased.

He knew he was weak.

He had come this far because he had something he did not want to lose despite being weak.

Being weak was not a reason to stop moving forward.

She had reminded him of that.

So…

"Don't worry," he finally said.

This time, he used only his own strength to slowly stand up.

"There's nothing to worry about now, Othinus. I wish I could have stopped Hamazura here, but I can't run off and leave this Magic God to him. I don't want to point at the destroyed world and say it was his fault. However the situation has developed, I need to adjust my plan to match."

"How exactly?"

“I’ll still have you analyze that St. Germain guy, but we’ll incorporate Hamazura and the others’ actions into it. Letting his friends escape safely comes first. I’m willing to act as a decoy for that. At the very least, St. Germain knows what I look like.”

At that point, he noticed that Othinus’s one eye was opened wide in an expression he had not seen before.

She then asked a clear question.

“St. Germain?”

X X X X

It was said that he had acquired a secret technique of immortality, that he ate nothing but water, wheat, and pills, and that he never aged.

It was said that he was a mysterious noble who had made his way throughout medieval Europe’s high society and that the strange frequency of his appearances led to rumors that he had a technique of traveling through time.

It was said that he possessed many magical techniques related to jewels and that he was highly prized by the other nobles for his ability to perfectly repair scratched diamonds.

It was said he was an enigmatic individual who wrote a grimoire owned by Cagliostro.

It was said there was no accurate record of his birth.

It was said there was no accurate record of his death.

In other words, the legend of St. Germain was not a thing of the past; it continued into the present.

With examples such as Russia’s Rasputin or ancient China’s Daji, mysterious people would occasionally appear in a place of politics or high society and bring chaos to that nation or the world.

It would be no exaggeration to say St. Germain was the world’s greatest example.

After troubling nation after nation, the legends of most others would end when they were defeated by a well-known magician or soldier. Some of the legends, like Japan’s Tamamo-no-Mae, involved several countries (although this theory says Daji and Tamamo-no-Mae were one and the same), but even she was cut down at the ends of the earth.

However, St. Germain did not fit that description.

His appearances were spread over multiple regions and scattered across time periods. Instead of just disappearing for years at a time, he would vanish for one hundred years before appearing again. A careful inspection of what he was recorded to have said showed him chatting about information he could not have known in that time period and no one was able to reproduce his jewels and pills.

Objects that could not have been produced with the time period’s standard level of civilization were known as out-of-place artifacts, but St. Germain felt like a human version of that. Instead of being surrounded by countless out-of-place artifacts, he himself did not seem to fit the time period.

And there was no record of him ever being defeated.

Any supposed grave was unreliable and no one claimed to be his descendant.

His appearances were so irregular that he became known as immortal or a time traveler, but if one carefully read through the various legends, it proved to be no laughing matter.

Or rather, the phenomenon that was St. Germain had reached a level unexplainable except by some truly ridiculous ideas.

That was why nothing was known about him.

He may have truly been immortal.

He may have come from ancient times and continually travelled further into the future.

He may have come from the future and continually travelled further into the past.

There was only one way to know for sure: acquire the same hidden knowledge he had and become the same sort of being he was.

X X X X

"Hi."

And so, the man naming himself St. Germain appeared before the girls of Item with the strange spear known as a Chambord resting on his shoulder.

Mugino Shizuri narrowed her eyes a little and immediately realized what the spear meant.

She gestured toward the outer wall she had filled with holes.

"Was that you?"

"It was. To be honest, I do not need it anymore once I get to the Dianoid's mid level TV Station and retrieve the Shield that produces a positive gap in the lattice, but unfortunately, I made a bit of a promise. Could you perhaps calm down a little in order to grant someone's wish?"

"Kinuhata." Mugino ignored him. "If you don't want to die, stay in a position where you can protect Takitsubo with your Offense Armor. I'll take care of this guy."

"Are you sure, Mugino?" asked Takitsubo.

"What do you mean by that exactly? If you're worried she'll go super overboard and kill him, then I'll agree with you."

It was the man in the tailcoat who laughed.

"You think you can escape the grasping fingertips of death with that?"

"You're pretty full of yourself for some stranger."

As he listened to Mugino, St. Germain gathered some slight strength in the Chambord resting on his shoulder. With a whistling sound, it drew a half-circle in the air and pointed at Mugino.

“I will ask one last time, young lady.”

“If you’re going to complain, wait until you’re in hell.”

“That is too bad. I suppose this is why they say ignorance is a sin.”

With a light smile, all hint of emotion vanished from St. Germain’s eyes.

“Now, *will you be able to say the same thing when you see your own heart beating outside your body?*”

An instant later, Mugino’s Meltdowner beam mercilessly vaporized the Chambord and St. Germain’s arm along with it.

The man’s arm vanished from the shoulder down.

The great heat had completely cauterized the wound, so there was no bleeding.

Academy City’s #4 spoke coldheartedly to St. Germain as he stared blankly at where his missing arm had been.

“Are you mocking me?”

An explosion of emotion soon followed.

However, it did not come from Mugino or St. Germain. It came from the frightened crowd gathered on the viewing platform. With earsplitting screams and shouts of anger, they fled with all their might. They moved with such force that they sometimes very nearly all toppled over like dominoes.

The people vanished, the area was left completely empty, and St. Germain spoke.

Despite the lost arm, he was smiling.

“By the way, young lady. Do you have anyone you would like to protect?”

“What?”

“If so, you should take this more seriously. Especially when you still have time to be so considerate.”

Perhaps done in by the heat, a few of his tailcoat buttons fell to the floor.

The tailcoat opened up to reveal something like clay strapped to his stomach.

Mugino immediately realized what that clay was.

“You-…!!”

The man had shown no sign of caring about the loss of his arm and the loss of his life seemed to be no different.

“Let me tell you one thing.”

The man moved the situation along while smiling.

“Even if an individual St. Germain dies, the St. Germain ideology shall not perish. …It shall never perish.”

It did not even take a full second.

A tremendous explosion assaulted Item as it filled that corner of the floor.

X X X X

“Ugh…”

Aihana Etsu held his head on the Dianoid’s roof.

He had come here to pursue his missing friend and rescue her from the darkness.

He could not rely on normal methods of searching for her secret, so using the help of an irregular element like St. Germain seemed like it would improve his odds of success.

But…

A horrific vision flitted through the back of his mind.

Countless Chambord spears had protruded from the walls and floor. Just like casually pushing aside an obstacle, fist-sized tunnels had appeared in the bodies and faces of the people passing by. That nightmarish scene still did not feel real and a floating sensation came over him every time he recalled it.

Could he really use something like that?

Was that really something one could control?

“In the end, if you’re weak, you have to do things the weak way.”

Another voice suddenly entered his mind which was trapped in that colorful nightmare.

He consciously controlled his breathing.

Even if it was just a mental image, he focused on breaking free of those self-made bonds.

“Of course, being strong is best, but as long as you know how much you can do and how far you can reach, you won’t go wrong. What’s scary are the people who don’t know their own reach. That’s like making a gamble with your own life.”

“…”

When she had said that, he had not known what she was talking about.

But now he did.

St. Germain was too great an unknown. If he relied on that, he would have his feet swept out from under him. He would still search for his friend’s secret in the Dianoid, but he had to gather his own cards to succeed. He could not leave it all up to luck and just wait for the trump card to come to him.

He had a plan now.

He looked around and started toward the door leading inside from the roof.

(St. Germain said the doors would unlock for me.)

He tried the knob and found he could easily turn it.

It opened without any resistance and the heated air gently blew out at him.

Instead of passing through the door or closing it, he placed a stone from the garden between the door and doorframe as a doorstop.

"And now…"

This time, he ran to the edge of the roof.

The Dianoid created a seventy-story cliff, so it was hopeless. He could not climb down or even drop something to communicate with someone below. If he wrote a note and threw it, he would have no idea where it would end up.

(But if I could let them know the roof's door is open, Anti-Skill could come by helicopter to rescue everyone.)

He walked along the edge of the roof.

Whether to strengthen the Dianoid or for decoration, thick wires were strung diagonally between the building's walls and the surface. He of course had no intention of climbing down one of those, but if he slid something down it, he could drop something while softening its landing.

He found one of the wires on the edge of the roof.

He removed the thin wire holding one of the garden's pine trees in place and tied it into a small loop around the thick wire. He pulled out his flip phone, activated the GPS alarm, tied the strap to the small wire, placed a note in between the folded flip phone, and let go.

Just like a ski lift, the cellphone slid down the Dianoid's thick wire.

When the adults detected the GPS signal, they would hurry to it. If they found the note, they would hopefully learn that the door on the Dianoid's roof was open.

(But that's all the help I can give.)

Aihana Etsu turned his back on the nighttime city down below.

He made his way to the open door into the Dianoid.

(I have to take action too.)

X X X X

“You idiot. I was wondering what had you so worried, but you really are stupid!”

The small Othinus was so angry she seemed about to erupt.

Kamijou was confused by her sudden rage.

“Eh? Um, what?”

“Listen.” Othinus pressed her index finger against her own temple. “The legend of St. Germain is famous. It’s even leaked out of the magic side and reached normal society. If you grabbed a random magician and asked them to name ten famous people, St. Germain’s name is sure to come up alongside Rosenkreuz and Mathers. That’s how high up there he is.”

“U-um…”

Kamijou frowned because he had no idea how major a name Rosen-whatever was.

“Doesn’t that mean St. Germain is ridiculously famous, ridiculously powerful, and the protagonist of some ridiculous mythology?”

“But,” forcefully cut in Othinus. “*St. Germain is nothing but a name.*”

“Eh?”

Kamijou did not even slightly understand what she meant.

“On the magic side, he was probably known as a rare sort of con man. It wasn’t uncommon to take on a famous name when sneaking into a party of nobles, but the identity of St. German was built from the ground up. At first, it was a free pass that let you sneak into the most formal of events and acquire any investment you wanted. You could say it was like an appraiser’s report calling a glass ball the highest quality of diamond. Immortality? Time travel? Those things aren’t even worth calling tricks.”

“Wait… Wait! You’re kidding, right? I mean…”

“Creating legends of immortality or time travel is a simple matter. He talked about times and places he had never been to or seen. He could have letters sent as proof that he had been there. He probably sometimes added in a time delay like with a time capsule. That throws any alibi out the window.”

“Please wait!! He…he really did bend the entire world before my eyes! It was like…like this… It’s hard to explain, but the walls, floor, and ceiling all turned into weapons, tunnels appeared in the people in the way, and they all attacked me at once!”

“Have you forgotten?” Othinus sounded almost utterly exasperated. “This is the Dianoid. The entire building is made of carbon materials. That means you don’t need control over every phase, every dimension, and every element to manipulate everything around you. *A magician with control over carbon and nothing else can pull that one off.*”

“…”

“There are two primary legends about St. Germain. The first is how he conquered aging whether by immortality or time travel. His predictions of the future and knowledge of great secrets are derived from the time travel. The second is his ability to control jewels and *restore scratched diamonds*. Doesn’t that seem to fit with the clichéd situation we have now?”

Diamonds were carbon.

The building was made of carbon.

The human body was organic matter and thus also made of carbon.

What did that mean?

“But…he knew.”

“Knew what?”

“What a Magic God is! Othinus, without you, the idea of a Magic God would just be a fantasy. Even the knowledge of the 103,000 grimoires isn’t quite enough to know about that! How could he pretend to be one so accurately!?”

“Don’t be stupid,” spat out Othinus. “Have you forgotten what happened in Denmark? Due to America’s interference, all of that was broadcast around the world. It may not have been enough to know the details of a Magic God’s inner workings or how to use the magic of one, but anyone could have figured out what one looks and how one acts. This person going by the name St. Germain could have checked any video site to find what he needed for his act. As embarrassing as that is to admit.”

“……”

Then what was he?

If St. Germain was not a Magic God like Othinus, was he just a normal (if that even meant anything at this point) magician who had not reached that level?

“But,” said Othinus. “If we are up against St. Germain here, it creates a problem much different from a Magic God that is concentrated on a single point.”

“What do you mean?”

“St. Germain did not just well up on its own like spring water from the earth. Do you know what created him and allowed him to spread?”

She answered his question with one of her own.

“The legend is a fake. It began as a free pass and had no credibility. But someone must have given it life. They used existing legends and magic to see if they could make the legend real. The same process has been seen with the Necronomicon. And using a vast sea of knowledge, they intentionally stimulated the small core and created a real crystal. I don’t know if they were fascinated by it or if they were using it to disguise something else, but the actual technique uses the alluring spread of the legend to pass between the people involved and those who wish to be a living witness of the events. And it organizes those people into a single crystal.”

She went on to give the ultimate answer.

“His ideology synchronizes people’s minds and infects them. And it does so incredibly easily.”

Kamijou heard footsteps.

And they belonged to more than just one person. He and Othinus were surrounded.

They filled every exit leaving the elevator hall.

He quickly looked around and saw nothing but tailcoats. At least a few dozen St. Germains calmly observed him.

The idea of a central unit may not have applied with them.

They were all the control tower and they were all terminals. Losing any one of them would not be a problem.

At any rate, one of them spoke.

“So we meet again *so soon*, Kamijou Touma.”

A moment later, their cruelty took the form of countless spears that rushed in from all directions like an inside-out hedgehog.

Between the Lines 2

I am used to being called a liar.

If you want to call me less than a Magic God to soothe your own pitiful self-respect, go right ahead.

There is no point in holding me within the infield of “magicians” or driving me into the outfield of “Magic Gods”. My existence can only be described as “me”.

I am a third category.

I am neither a magician nor a Magic God.

I am St. Germain.

No other term can describe me, but it seems some stubborn people have difficulty understanding that on a conceptual level. It is similar to how those obsessed with logic and numbers cannot understand the sparkle of the artificially-stabilized non-equilibrium structure that is a diamond.

Arguing against the incompetent is a futile task.

There is no speaking with those who fully believe something is “common sense” just because everyone is too stupid to see the truth.

No matter how many times you prove what is true, you will only learn all too well that the skeptics are equipped with a filter that prevents them from seeing the evidence before their eyes.

But I will not keep people from that all too pitiful happiness.

I can watch in satisfaction as they amusingly age, grow thin, and ultimately wish to rely on my methods of immortality.

Of course, I did not slip into high society because I was interested in fame or fortune.

Quite the opposite, in fact. I gathered an unwanted and lowly fortune because displaying it was the bare minimum necessary to make appearances at those parties and gatherings.

The truly unfortunate fact is that what I desire lies within that high society.

They have allowed that framework to decay and become a mere shell of what it once was, but what I desire still lies within it nonetheless.

And so I searched for it. I continued to swim through that utterly rotten mud in search of a single possibility. I was half drowning in that sea of people swollen with countless desires.

Ah.

Boy, have you realized your true value?

You seem to have gained temporary strength by viewing yourself as another, but have you realized what name you bear and what power you hold?

Not everyone needs to be #1.

You need only aim for what no one else has.

That idea can be heard just about anywhere, but it cannot be used as an excuse by the defeatists who laugh and reject all competition. It is nothing that simple. Rather than follow the path to the mountaintop that someone else has set out for you, you must clear a new path on your own. That is much more difficult and worthy of praise.

Boy, you have already obtained that.

I certainly did not expect to find it in Academy City of all places, but it would certainly explain why I found no hint of it in Paris, Berlin, or Moscow. No, enough of that. I should simply accept my failure and continue forward. I should have focused on the fact that the Anglican Church has a hotline with Academy City.

At any rate, I am finally able to meet you, boy.

The shield to match the sword.

How much time do you think I have spent in search of it? It would be a shame if you simply answered “since the 1600’s”. You cannot rely on the history established by the skeptics and those unable to work for themselves.

Thinking back, it was a meaningless span of time, but thinking on this instant is enough to wipe the weariness away.

Now, it is time to harvest the fruits of my labor.

Are you watching, Magic Gods? Just as a magician of ancient Britain used a unique sword to select a single soul, I have acquired something you lack.

I am St. Germain. I desire only a single truth.

And to that end, I will spread infinite falsehoods.

Chapter 3: The Vanishing Girl's Legacy — Hard_MEMORY.

What did Kamijou Touma think of at that moment?

It may have been the Sisters, those mass-produced military clones of Academy City's #3 Level 5. Those girls used their identical brainwaves and ability to control electricity in order to construct a unique living data network known as the Misaka Network. They used it to share their memories, techniques, and knowledge.

It may have been *the rumors he had heard* about Academy City's #5. That monster was a single person, but she was said to read minds, speak telepathically, brainwash, hypnotize, and otherwise control just about every part of her opponents' minds. In a way, she created a great number of puppets controlled by a single control tower.

It may have been the C Document that Terra of the Left of God's Right Seat had tried to activate in Avignon, France to direct the world's hatred toward Academy City.

It may have been the Leshy, a mind controlling spell used in Hawaii by Saronia A. Irivika so Gremlin could take administrative control of the United States.

It may have been Yakumi Hisako, a former member of Academy City's board of directors. She had created the Agitate Halation project to mass produce inferior heroes around Fremea Seivelun.

"Uuh…"

Dozens of people in tailcoats surrounded him.

They were a mix of ages and genders, but it looked like they had forcibly matched their appearances as much as possible.

It was like some kind of synchronization or parallelism.

It spread from person to person, transforming them into weapons that produced only violence.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

The hair across Kamijou's body stood on end as he screamed. A moment later, "they" came.

They burst from the walls, floor, and ceiling.

The entire scenery grew distorted and undulated. Countless spears of countless sizes shot out and rushed toward him like a torrential downpour.

A simple calculation suggested there were one hundred Chambords for each St. Germain present.

This oddity of a spell allowed them to control diamonds, carbon, and thus this entire building.

There was no way Kamijou could negate every attack with just his right hand.

So the action he took was simple.

He kicked up the fire extinguisher sitting nearby and shoved it forward.

As soon as it came into contact with the spears, compressed gas exploded out. The fire extinguishing powder looked more pink than white as it covered everything. Visibility dropped to zero. The countless spears filled the entire space in a lattice pattern and cleanly sliced through the barrier of powder.

But Kamijou was already gone.

Only the fire extinguisher remained, torn to shreds and pinned in midair.

(I was right.)

The group of St. Germains seemed to have shifted their focus toward the destroyed door to the elevator shaft.

However, Kamijou had run through the smokescreen and passed right by them.

He ran, almost tripping, and fled to another area.

(If "all" St. Germain can do is control the Dianoid, there would be no point in him actually appearing in front of me. He could just turn the entire building into a bed of spikes like an iron maiden. He didn't do that…no, he *couldn't* do that, so there has to be a reason. He must only be able to use his carbon control magic *based on the senses of the others synced with or parallel with him.* It only seemed like there was nowhere to hide in here because there were that many St. Germains mixed in!)

He gulped and desperately told himself to calm down.

(I'm not up against an almighty Magic God here. He may look that way, but there's a reason behind each individual action. There has to be a limit on those tunnels he opens in people's body. If not, he would have removed my right arm or plucked out my heart right off the bat.)

And the same had to apply to his ability to synchronize with and infect people.

(I can figure this out.)

He clenched his right fist.

He still did not know what he should negate, but even so…

(They're like walking weapons, but there has to be some kind of gear down at the bottom. If they've been synchronized or infected, it means these people are the city's teachers and students. If I can remove that, they might return to normal!!)

And then…

"…"

"…"

"…"

"…"

All of the St. Germains turned their heads and faced him in unison.

“Dammit!!”

Crouched low, he hurried onward.

The second wave of spears flew mercilessly toward him.

X X X X

Once the countless St. Germains chased Kamijou into a different area, the elevator hall was left empty.

However, one of the square paper lanterns set up alongside the waterway was shaking.

A fifteen centimeter girl poked her head out from inside it.

It was Othinus.

(They have surprisingly unreliable senses. Is crystalizing them as St. Germain considered enough of a success, so each individual unit hasn’t been properly polished? Has he improved his ability to control diamonds and gained the ability to control carbon as a whole? *If the world has only a single chance here*, this is quite the troublesome foe.)

Othinus had not chosen to hide in the lamp herself. As soon as he had set up the fire extinguisher smokescreen, Kamijou had shoved her inside the light fixture and fled.

It had almost seemed like he had chosen a more noticeable action to draw their attention.

(If that was part of his “bad habit”, this would be the time to punch him, but…)

She sighed.

She guessed Kamijou was after information on St. Germain. After all, Othinus had been a true Magic God and yet even she deemed this opponent to be “troublesome”.

St. Germain had no central unit or terminal unit. They were all synchronized and they were all parallel. The nucleus of a crystal formed around the distribution of the high-concentration solution and the materials that attached around it were completely identical.

Diamonds were hard and breaking them did not change their structure.

(But…)

Diamonds were said to be crystals made of pure carbon, but even the purest diamond was only 99.9% pure. Over twenty different types of impurities existed in that slight gap. And that less than 0.1% impurity would change the properties of the entire diamond. Everything from how hard it was to its electrical conductivity, coloration, and transparency were influenced by that. They were not the center or the nucleus, but those meaningless impurities were the controller that manipulated the entire crystal.

St. Germain had to have something similar.

He was a magician that controlled diamonds. He was a life form who could control even his own body as carbon-based organic matter. So if St. Germain was viewed as a single giant crystal created by synchronizing and parallelizing a group, he had to have something like a controller or settings file.

With that in mind, Kamijou would draw out St. Germain's attacks on the vanguard while the analysts on the rear guard would reveal the structure and weaknesses of his spell. That was the correct way to go about this.

"But still," muttered fifteen centimeter Othinus. "Through all of those hundreds of billions of phases, I missed the Misaka Network that manipulated the border between life and death. Does he also contain the possibility to always show up or appear anew in every world or phase I created?"

She looked to the floor and saw a few clumps of blood.

She doubted they belonged to Kamijou Touma.

(To him, using up personnel must be the same as using impurities to create gaps in the otherwise even crystalline structure. Maintaining his overall properties even when an individual is crushed would make him a first-class diamond. I'm sure he knew what would happen when he forced Academy City's espers to use magic.)

Othinus was surprised to find that displeased her.

From an efficiency standpoint, St. Germain was right.

There was no reason to worry about their enemies in the science side's Academy City.

All lives were not of equal value during battle.

Was it that pointy-haired boy's influence that would not let her allow it?

"What a pain… I guess I was fundamentally broken, too."

She shook her head and focused on analysis once more.

If she was going to search for the optimal answer…

(Come to think of it, we left the Index Librorum Prohibitorum behind. Well, if she had been here, Kamijou Touma might have chosen a different course of action.)

Her fifteen centimeter stature was not always a bad thing.

There were limits to what she could do, but St. Germain could only search for enemies by sealing off all routes that someone human-sized could pass through. At fifteen centimeters, she could take paths unavailable to others.

And that went beyond simply crawling below a vending machine and travelling through that slight gap. A cat could jump down from a height of two or three stories, but that was not just because of its body structure and athletic ability. Its light weight reduced the impact of landing, too.

"Now, my first priority is contacting the Index Librorum Prohibitorum. Whether I manage that or not, I need to figure out where Kamijou Touma and St. Germain are, observe them, and find a way to break St. Germain's crystalline structure."

She sounded irritated, but she had summed up what she had to do.

Those were the necessary steps to achieve victory.

She was, after all, an individual who had become known as a god of war.

X X X X

Then again, Kamijou could not continue dodging the St. Germains' attacks forever.

Their magic surrounded him with a set of one hundred spears like an inside-out hedgehog, making it a simple yet effective countermeasure to Imagine Breaker. Not to mention that dozens of people were using that same magic at once and more St. Germains were mixed into the people not currently chasing him.

His odds of survival were rapidly declining.

This would not have been easy under normal circumstances, but this added further irregularities into the mix.

"Dammit!!"

There were only so many ways he could block their sight. Also, this was only the preliminary encounter. The true battle began once Index or Othinus analyzed St. Germain and found a weakness.

All he could do was run around corner after corner, trying to escape from the St. Germains' sight.

And he was so focused on the enemies behind him that he ran right into someone else turning the corner ahead.

"Wah!?"

"This way!"

The person pulled on his hand and dragged him behind the reception counter to what seemed to be a gym.

He could hear several sets of footsteps passing by the corridor beyond the counter.

The other person was practically embracing him, but once he pulled himself free and checked who it was, he found he recognized them.

"What? You're that Aihana guy, right?"

"W-well, I suppose. You wouldn't be wrong to call me Aihana Etsu."

It was the boy with semi-long brown hair.

Kamijou gently sighed.

"Well, you saved me regardless. Listen, I'm heading back out when the time is right, but you stay here. If you are going to leave, wait a bit and go in the opposite direction. You haven't been spotted yet, but if you are, they'll fill you with holes. I'm not sure I can cover for you."

"No," cut in Aihana Etsu.

When he shook his head, a sweet aroma was shaken from his hair.

“I don’t know who they are, but I doubt it’s anything that simple. They knew we were here, but they overlooked us because they don’t want to get me caught up in this.”

“What?”

“For some reason, this St. Germain guy is obsessed with me. He seems to have given me alone the ability to use the sealed elevators and doors. That’s how I got to the mid level. I figured out these St. Germain people were after you from the behind-the-scenes videos,” he explained. “They’re all dressed the same, so maybe they all think the same. That means having you head out isn’t the best plan here. I should go right into the middle of them. If I’m in the center of things, they’ll have a harder time fighting.”

That thought shocked Kamijou, but when he reflexively tried to argue, Aihana Etsu placed his index finger on his lips.

The sensation of the boy’s slender finger silenced him.

“Whatever his goal is, St. Germain won’t kill me right away. He’ll want to talk. That’s our chance. If I can loosen his lips and get some information out of him, we might find a way out of this. That would obviously be better than sitting around waiting to be killed and it’s something only I can do.”

The boy’s words were logical, but his face was deathly pale.

His shoulders were trembling and they looked so skinny they would break if someone grabbed them too roughly.

He had to be scared.

It was not clear what St. Germain wanted and he could change his mind at any time. The odds were good he would bare his fangs the instant it was revealed Aihana Etsu was hiding something. And if that happened, there was no escape.

If their positions had been reversed and Kamijou was asked to play that role, he honestly doubted he could have done it.

And if St. Germain had noticed what they were doing, Aihana Etsu’s suggestion was not even an undercover mission. St. Germain would already know he was letting Kamijou escape, so it would be more like taking or exchanging hostages.

“If…”

Aihana Etsu spoke while looking up at Kamijou. He grabbed Kamijou’s coat at the chest and his self-made fear brought tears to the corners of his eyes.

Nevertheless…

“If I don’t make it back, can you do one thing for me? A girl named Frenda Seivelun has an apartment in the upper level of the Dianoid. There might be something there to tell me what happened to my missing friend. If I have that, I might find a clue to saving her. St. Germain said something ominous about the ‘last vestiges’ of her, but I don’t know if that’s true. If I can’t do it, please find it for me. If I know someone will, then I can go do this now.”

“Hey, stop. I don’t even know what kind of person you are. If you’re carrying something you can’t back down on, then that’s all the more reason why you can’t do something like this for me!”

“Don’t worry,” said Aihana Etsu.

He looked Kamijou right in the eye from close range.

And he spoke as if to convince himself.

He seemed to be forcibly overwriting the fear that was overflowing from his true self.

He looked to the person who would believe this was who he was.

“I’m Aihana Etsu.”

There was no time to stop him.

Aihana Etsu removed his hands from Kamijou Touma, ran out from behind the gym counter, and made his way out of the shop. He rushed out into the open where countless St. Germains lay in wait.

There was no point in running out after him.

In fact, beginning a sudden battle increased the risk of Aihana Etsu being hit by a stray attack.

Kamijou understood that.

He did, but…

“…!!”

He clenched his teeth, clenched his fist until it oozed blood, and yet had nothing he could do here.

He would not waste this opportunity.

Ensuring that was his only option here.

X X X X

Once he moved out into the open, Aihana Etsu’s range of options narrowed significantly.

First of all, the countless St. Germains all focused on him. They may have already noticed him long ago, but things changed once they stopped acting and let each other know that they were aware of each other.

At this point, any attempt to run or hide increased the risk of his actions being viewed as hostile. And if he strayed out of line with only the name “Aihana Etsu” on his side, he had no way to avoid being skewered.

Then again…

(The situation isn’t going to improve if I don’t do anything.)

His fear transformed into lightheadedness as he desperately tried to think.

(I don't know why St. Germain is letting me go. He's freely attacking all the other people trapped in the Dianoid and I can't imagine why he would be treating me differently. I can't just do what he says. I have to get off of the rails he's set up for me!! If I don't, I won't be able to do what I came here to do!!)

Even if he was risking his life or sacrificing himself, he was still leaving the most important part to someone else.

He ignored the situation and had to suppress a smile at just how typical of him this was.

Kamijou Touma was a name he had heard while crying as he was punched and kicked in the back alleys. At the time, he had had nothing and had been feeling his way through the darkness and wandering around as if wearing a blindfold.

He had no connection to that person.

His only interaction with the boy was being given a bottle of water when the boy mistakenly thought he had heatstroke. It was far too cheap to leave his life with someone like that. He had done so anyway because even that tiny connection was more than he had with anyone else in the Dianoid.

He had received a bottle of water from St. Germain as well.

However, there was a slight difference between a monster attempting to curry his favor and Kamijou Touma who had wanted nothing in return.

His only choice was to bet on that.

This was just as supremely foolish as someone betting their lifesavings on their lucky color.

He knew that, but he still clung to that spider web.

And now a great number of tailcoats waited for him.

"Hi, hi! Should I still be calling you Aihana Etsu? I'm a little busy at the moment, but I can free up some time for you. How are things going with the Frenda Seivelun thing?"

"…"

Unlike before, it was not just a man. Age and gender did not matter. When alone, their costumes made them stand out, but when a group of them gathered, Aihana Etsu was the one who felt out of place.

"Didn't I tell you to hurry if you wanted to know the truth? It's interesting how it's possible to actually be *too* kind, isn't it? Or should I have escorted you to the upper level apartments?"

Aihana Etsu placed a hand on the center of his chest.

He switched to a new train of thought and focused on the thin student ID card.

He looked up with a challenge in his eyes.

"My problem can wait until later. More importantly, what about you?"

"Hm?"

"For how confident you sound, it doesn't seem like things are going all that well. Are you sure you can manage?"

A rusty smell wafted in from the surrounding group.

Some of them had bandages wrapped around themselves, but had they really been hit by their opponents?

“Oh, nothing to worry about. From now on, I will be more careful in my selection. You use diamond to cut diamond, but it seems I used them a little too roughly. *I probably should have only used the teachers.*”

“…?”

Aihana Etsu had never heard of the side-effects of using magic and St. Germain provided no explanation.

“You did not waste your precious chance to approach Frenda Seivelun just to talk about this, did you?”

“Don’t worry. If you take out everyone in my way, I can take my time searching for that girl’s secret.”

“Ha ha! I suppose so. But ‘kind’ certainly is an apt description for you. For me, this is like having my reward paid in full up front.”

One of the St. Germains reached out an arm and suggested they find somewhere to talk.

Next, they all extended an arm like the wind blowing through a wheat field.

At the same time, Aihana Etsu recalled the words of his friend.

“In the end, you need to be careful when someone treats you like an old friend the first time you see them. The ones who can fake the expression aren’t too bad and the ones who only trick you with words are even better, but the ones who fake their own emotions are the truly dangerous ones. Those are the ones who have taken a step outside of what can be described in terms of good and evil.”

That friend’s cellphone had included the addresses of easily over one thousand people. She certainly knew more about people than he did.

“Nee hee hee. Not that I’m one to talk with how much I let others influence me.”

“…”

He let the St. Germains guide him through a dance hall of swirling death and violence.

He was led to an elevator that took him to the rooftop Japanese garden where he had spoken with St. Germain before.

A single St. Germain waited for him in the moonlight.

This one was far older than him. She appeared to be in college or a new teacher. The adult woman had white skin, blue eyes, and wavy blond hair that reached her waist.

There were many different types of tailcoats, but this woman’s one resembled the stage outfit of a woman illusionist. It was something like a jacket and bunny suit combination.

She wore a monocle that resembled a butterfly wing and her face looked somehow familiar.

She almost looked like Aihana Etsu’s friend if she had grown into a beautiful woman.

“The carbon making up any diamond is nothing but carbon, but the impurities making up less than 0.1% create countless varieties of colored diamonds. What splits people’s personal preferences on diamonds are

those miniscule imperfections. I thought you might grow to like me if I shined like this and I hoped that would help our conversation run more smoothly."

The blonde St. Germain laughed casually.

That woman had to have had her own life, personality, respect, and happiness.

But just knowing this was unreasonable was not enough to break free of it.

This was not a situation in which the mask of "Aihana Etsu" was enough.

"Now, now, now. Where to begin? My mind is filled with things I would like to say, but where should I begin to confuse you the least? Oh, it has been so long. It has been far too long since I came across such a delightful proposition."

"I want you to promise me just one thing first."

"No need to limit yourself to just one. Make as many requests as you like."

"You already know I didn't approach you because I'm your friend, right?"

"Oh, you mean the person you desperately tried to let escape?"

"Hiding it won't do any good. I'm here now, so don't lay a finger on that boy. If you don't promise me that, I refuse to speak with you."

"*Very well.*"

The blonde St. Germain readily agreed while sliding open a rectangular pill case she had pulled out at some point and dropping a black pill onto her soft palm.

"I would really rather not promise that, but for you I will do it. And why stop with him? As long as you keep speaking with me, I will promise not to do any harm to anyone inside the Dianoid."

When he heard that, Aihana Etsu carelessly bared his true face before this obvious enemy.

He gave a sigh of relief.

A heated breath flowed white into the night wind.

St. Germain smiled quietly as she watched that expression that could only be described as inexperienced.

Yes.

St. Germain was interested only in a single truth.

With anything else, she was willing to tell billions of lies with a smile on her lips.

X X X X

He heard a tremendous explosion and felt he building shake, but that was not the most ominous thing Hamazura sensed while searching the Dianoid's mid level in the Power Lifter. More than his sight and hearing, it was his sense of smell that got to him.

It smelled like fireworks and there was a hint of rust thrown in.

Aneri's analysis said it was a nitrogen oxide reaction which pointed to a certain possibility.

(Don't tell me there's a bomb.)

The word naturally came to mind, but his brain did everything it could to reject the idea.

That could not be.

It just could not.

Then what was that strange smell? Where had the person named St. Germain gone after trapping so many people in the Dianoid? What had he done to Item who could possibly open up an elevator shaft or emergency staircase with the #4's Meltdowner? How did all that lead to the same scent he had sensed on the burning snowy plains of Russia?

"Pant, pant."

Despite using the Power Lifter, he was even more out of breath than when using his own two legs.

He could tell an unusual amount of sweat was flowing from his brow.

Aneri sent out a mental warning and suggested playing a video pattern file with a calming effect, but he did not have time to bother with any of that.

"What the hell is going on? Goddammit!!"

The closer he got to the scene, the more difficult it was to keep going. The reason for this was obvious: boys and girls were rushing toward whim while screaming in terror or anger. They were not focused on him. They were simply trying to escape the scene of the blast as quickly as possible.

His desire to know what happened naturally sent him in the opposite direction, but he could not exactly use the Power Lifter's strength to knock them out of the way.

His slowed pace and the sensation that the dangerous truth was slipping from his fingers was enough to wear on his nerves.

What had happened to the girls who had been waiting for him in the Dianoid?

Where was Mugino Shizuri? Where was Kinuhata Saiai?

And where was Takitsubo Rikou?

He just about cried out, but then he spotted something strange: he was not the only one working against the sudden crowd of people.

Far away, a boy's eyes opened wide as if he had run into an invisible wall.

It was Kamijou Touma.

(Him?)

The boy looked at the confused crowd of people once more and then turned around.

A moment later, a flesh-colored hell opened up.

First, an undulation ran through the floor and walls.

Next, a large group of spears flew toward Kamijou Touma.

Finally, fist-sized tunnels opened in the bodies and faces of the boys and girls and the spears passed through them.

“A-…”

It was an inescapably evil scene.

No matter what the reason, he could not understand how a vision like that could be allowed.

“Aaaa

Hamazura looked back and his eyes opened wide.

He saw a man in a tailcoat.

And the man was not alone. There were five or ten of them walking their way.

Just like a diamond, even heat seemed to spread between them in an instant, so they burned with a mad passion.

“You’re kidding!! You have got to be kidding!! And when I have so many other things to deal with!”

“It’s all over if you die! You’ve gotten caught up in this, so you should probably run away for now!”

“I still don’t know if my girlfriend’s safe!! It would tear my heart to pieces if I left her alone now!!”

“Damn. I see.”

Kamijou briefly squeezed his eyes shut and seemed to shake something off.

He turned around and faced the St. Germains before speaking.

“Then we’ll share the burden. You go do what you have to do and I’ll hold them off.”

“How!?”

“I’ll figure it out! You said you’d settled things with me, remember? Then it’s only natural for you to get the best spot!! So go!!”

It was Hamazura’s turn to rub his brow and shake his head.

It would be easy to abandon this boy.

If he ordered everything according to priority, there was no way this boy’s life would rank higher than Takitsubo.

But would Takitsubo and the others accept him if he made that choice?

Had he fallen in love with someone like that?

“…Dammit.”

He spat out the curse from the very bottom of his heart.

The Power Lifter’s giant arms then grabbed the pointy-haired boy by the back of the neck.

“Ah! Wait! What are you-…!?”

There was no time to explain.

Still holding Kamijou, he had the Power Lifter’s leg bite into a thick pillar. The machine bounced around like a pinball. He would occasionally use the walls or even the ceiling as footing, occasionally grab objects on the wall, and crossed the entire floor by irregularly jumping around without ever touching the ground.

“…”

“…”

“…”

“…”

The countless St. Germains turned his way.

A moment later, countless spears extended from the floor and flew toward the Power Lifter like a group of surface-to-air missiles.

“Aneri, ballistic prediction!! And you can switch off the inertial Gs limiter!!”

He made his way to an area not yet infected by St. Germain.

He leaped to a theatre, jumped straight up, and tried used the second or third story seats to reach another floor.

However, St. Germain was faster.

A few sets of eyes looked up at him from the bottom seats. The seats and walls twisted into countless spears and approached as another solid surface.

The open space of the theatre was working against him.

The Power Lifter was nimble, but it could not bounce around like a pinball without anything to use as footing. His movements grew simpler while in midair.

The enemy could perfectly aim for him and skewer him.

But just before that happened, a great roar filled the air.

Another machine came from the theatre’s third story seats. Like a shooting star, the other Power Lifter performed a flying kick and forcibly broke the approaching spears.

Even if it was not a military weapon, the Power Lifter was not the kind of heavy machinery that had spread to the general public quite yet.

There were only two of them in the Dianoid, so there could only be one person operating this other one.

(Stephanie.)

“Teacher!?”

He cried out without thinking, but his grasp of the situation could not keep up with the passage of time. After breaking the pursuing spears, Stephanie’s Power Lifter swung its arms and legs in midair to balance itself and fell to where the countless St. Germains waited.

Hamazura did not know if Mugino, Kinuhata, or Takitsubo were safe.

And now Stephanie had jumped into danger.

“Kh.”

His steel hand grabbed the railing to the third story seats and he climbed up while taking a breath. After that, a groan escaped his mouth.

It quickly grew into a scream.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

She tried to protect herself with the metal arms, but the countless spears smashed, tore, and broke the Power Lifter to pieces.

(If only I could have gotten that information to someone else.)

The steel-smashing fangs would reach her soft flesh in just a few seconds more, but Hamazura Shiage would be able to escape in that time.

That was enough for her to remember the slight smile on her sweat-covered face.

However…

A brilliant beam of light shot in from the side and overturned the assumption of her death.

Every last spear was instantly vaporized.

A swirl of scorching heat melted the door leading to the theatre's first story seats as well as the surrounding wall.

A crackling charge filled the air.

Time seemed to stop and extreme violence ruled the scene.

"Hi there."

The owner of that violence stepped into the theatre.

It was Mugino Shizuri.

She was Meltdowner, Academy City's #4 Level 5.

Her beautiful feminine bodyline was surrounded by countless spherical swirls of electrons that heated her surroundings to the limit.

"If you're after that desperate bomber man, he's over there. Make sure to clean up after him. He's causing everyone trouble with the absolute mess he made of the place."

The St. Germains all turned toward Mugino.

Their deadly sights were trained on her, but the #4 showed no sign of caring.

Not only that, but a girl in a knit dress and a girl in a pink track suit spoke up from behind her.

"Umm, just to be super sure you're aware, these guys are a little strange for being our enemies. If you mercilessly genocide them, it might lead to some annoying attempts at revenge later. *Being the target of* some hackneyed sob story is the most dangerous part of working for the dark side."

"Shut the hell up. It's their fault for being controlled."

"And Mugino," added the track suit girl. "Can I make one request?"

"?"

"There's an atrium there, right? Fire a shot straight up into it."

“Oh?”

Mugino sounded like she barely cared, but she still raised a palm and released a deadly beam of light up into the atrium.

“Now, time to get down to business.”

“Were you even listening!? If you super genocide what are technically innocent people, we’ll end up chased around by some righteous heroes or something!”

“Then let’s see who can take out more of them. If you can safely knock them all out with your Offense Armor, I won’t have to use my Meltdowner at all.”

“No fair! You’re just making it super easy for yourself!”

The St. Germains did not wait for the girls to finish yelling at each other.

They launched countless spears at the two of them as a surprise attack.

Mugino did not even have time to release Meltdowner.

However…

“Are you serious?”

She sounded exasperated.

First, she lightly swung her head.

Next, her perfectly normal slender arm easily grabbed a spear thrust toward her face.

No.

No, it was actually…

“I told you your bomber man failed, didn’t I? Kinuhata and I tore the bombs from him and threw them away. Thanks to that, no one died and you didn’t get what you wanted.”

With a dull crunch, she mercilessly crushed the carbon spear in her grasp. The smooth motion was accompanied by a quiet mechanical whirring.

It was a prosthetic hand.

During Mugino Shizuri’s many battles, she had traded an eye, an arm, and all her skin for artificial replacements.

Rather than viewing it negatively, she had modified her own body to match her belligerent tendencies.

“Don’t just assume a Level 5 is nothing but her power. I’ll kill you.”

With those words, the monsters named Mugino Shizuri and Kinuhata Saiai mercilessly charged into the group of St. Germains.

X X X X

Among the third story seats, Kamijou cried out when he saw the thick beam of light pierce vertically through the Dianoid.

Aneri gave a high heat warning.

“Wah!? Wh-what!?”

On the other hand, all of the tension bled away from Hamazura.

That was the signal.

It was an extremely unreasonable announcement saying that all of the danger would be swept away by brute force.

“Ha ha. That’s right. They aren’t the type to die so easily.”

“What do you mean?”

Hamazura heard something like a hiccough come from himself.

At the same time, some slight tears welled up in his eyes.

He both cried and smiled.

“Just talking to myself! It means they didn’t need reinforcements. Of course they didn’t. Why in the hell did a Level 0 think he needed to help two Level 4s and a Level 5? Ha ha ha ha ha!!”

“???”

Kamijou was utterly confused, but Hamazura had apparently settled something in his hart.

He now had the leeway to focus on Kamijou instead of his own issues.

He left the third story seats and found a corridor untouched by St. Germain’s “infection”.

“What are you going to do now?”

“I want to rescue the kid named Aihana Etsu. He ran right into the St. Germains – those people in tailcoats – to let me escape. Now it’s my turn to return the favor.”

“Aihana?”

Hamazura frowned and pictured the child of indeterminate gender who had been sneaking around the Dianoid’s parking lot.

“Is he the real deal? Are you sure he isn’t a fake just using the name?”

“It doesn’t matter. He risked himself to save my life, so he’s a true hero either way.”

Kamijou continued speaking.

“And I’m curious about St. Germain’s actions. He’s apparently obsessed with Aihana, but doesn’t that seem inconsistent with the other things he’s been doing?”

“What? Can you dumb it down a little?”

“If all he wants to do is contact Aihana, he wouldn’t need to try to kill us. In fact, he wouldn’t need to seal all the Dianoid’s exits or even do it today. He could have just waited in a dark alleyway and abducted Aihana.”

“Now that you mention it…”

“He didn’t take all these unrelated hostages just to speak with Aihana. But that raises some fundamental questions. Is St. Germain even interested in Aihana Etsu? Is that really his final objective?”

“Still, he’s using some of his resources to help Aihana. That would mean…”

“He might be using Aihana for some other goal. Or he’s pushing Aihana to do something for him.”

Kamijou chose his words carefully.

“That makes me curious about the last thing Aihana said. He said something’s hidden in the Dianoid that might help him save a missing friend of his. If he can’t, he wanted me to search for Frenda Seivelun’s secret in his place.”

“Frenda?” asked Hamazura without thinking.

Aneri automatically began a search for the name, but they either had no signal or the records on the dark side were sealed off because the window froze up.

However, the correct answer was in his head.

The girl’s fate flashed through the back of his mind. Her torso had been torn apart in a frenzy and her upper body had been dragged around while spilling its organs like a torn stuffed animal.

There was no saving that life.

“Did you just say Frenda!?”

“Yeah. Do you know her?”

“Well, yes…”

Her fate was not an easy thing to explain, but Kamijou did not stick with the issue.

“If Aihana is manipulated into doing something, this Frenda girl’s secret is what we need to break him free. We can apparently find it if we search the apartments on the upper level, so we need to do that. I don’t know if Aihana is St. Germain’s goal or just something he’s doing for fun, but don’t you think we could catch St. Germain off guard if we did remove Aihana from his control?”

“That’s enough,” cut in Hamazura. “If Frenda’s a part of all this, then I’m in. That’s enough reason for me to see this through to the end.”

With the Power Lifter, travelling between floors was not difficult.

They only had to break through the elevator door and use the elevator shaft.

If they climbed that tunnel toward the heavens, they would reach the high-class apartments on the Dianoid's upper level.

The truth they desired was there.

X X X X

She had long wavy blonde hair and white skin.

The college-aged woman in a tailcoat sat on the teahouse storefront bench and Aihana Etsu sat next to her.

They were in the moonlit garden.

On the Dianoid's roof, St. Germain took a black pill from her pill case and tossed it into her mouth.

"St. Germain's name became widely known during the 1600s. He was known as an alchemist who knew the art of immortality or a man from the future with a technique to travel through time. However, I have actually been active since around the year 500. Of course, I haven't used a single individual from beginning to end. Instead, my primary meaning multiplies without end."

"…"

"Why do you think that is?" asked St. Germain with a soft smile. "What do you think I have lived so long for?"

Aihana Etsu shook his head.

"How could I know that?"

"How honest of you. But there is no need to make this complicated. St. Germain is known as mysterious individual who appears in the high societies of countless nations during countless time periods, but my goal is something you would find in a children's picture book."

At some point, the rectangular pill case had vanished from her hand

A closer inspection showed that was due to sleight of hand, not the supernatural.

"Aihana. How much do you know about the legend of King Arthur?"

"Arthur?"

"You know, the man who became king after pulling out the sword in the stone. Of course, most people only know the first part of the legend and know none of the details about what kind of life the man lived."

At that point, Aihana Etsu finally recalled the sword named Excalibur.

Then again, he only knew of it as the name of a weapon in a 3D RPG he had played. He pointlessly remembered it had bene the third strongest sword in the game and that it let you attack four times in a single turn.

"By the way, do you know who the strongest knight was in that long, long legend?"

“Eh? You mean it wasn’t the king?”

“No.” St. Germain shook her index finger. “In fact, the king himself was not all that strong. He was chosen by the sword, but he became King of Britain thanks to the knights surrounding him. The king is not necessarily the main character of every story.”

“I see.”

“It’s also technically incorrect to say the Knights of the Round Table were the ultimate team. That system was only introduced later and it did not include any of the old knights who had initially supported the king. So if you look through all of the legends, who is truly the strongest knight?”

She stopped her shaking finger and continued on.

“The answer is Galahad. He was the ultimate knight born to Lancelot and Elaine, Princess of the Holy Grail Castle. He was a pure knight who surpassed the king and improved upon Lancelot’s imperfections. King Arthur became King of Britain by drawing a sword, but Galahad is said to have possessed both a holy sword and a holy shield and to have finally acquired the Holy Grail with his purity and strength. …On the other hand, he was so perfect he lacked any humanity, so he was something like a combat machine.”

What did that have to do with anything?

Aihana Etsu was confused and it must have shown on his face because St. Germain smiled softly once more.

“Did it go in one ear and out the other since it’s outside your field of expertise? The king acquired a sword, but Galahad outdid him by acquiring both a sword and a shield. However, that raises a question. Wouldn’t the king have originally had two issues to deal with? Wouldn’t there have been a shield somewhere in the world powerful enough to act as Excalibur’s counterpart?”

If he had the title of “king”, King Arthur would have been on the upper levels of society.

And a lot of people would have wanted to get their hands on anything he had owned.

Information on the shield could easily have been hidden in those high society parties and gatherings.

Was that why St. Germain had blended in as a noble?

Aihana Etsu wondered that like he was thinking about a fairy tale, but…

“And have you heard another rumor, boy?”

"…?"

"That king had a twin sister. Her name was Anne, Queen Anne. She never appears in the legends as a knight or as a princess and no one knows what happened to her. For that reason, she is treated like a false addition to the story. But what if it were true?"

Some strange kind of sweetness entered her smile.

"The legend ends when the king and his son Mordred kill each other. Some of his blood remained in distant relatives like Constantine, but the direct line ended there. …Yet Queen Anne's presence would overturn that entirely. King Arthur's blood may have been passed on."

If that was true, it would indeed be a big deal.

It would breathe new life into an ancient legend.

But…

"Did you actually believe me?"

The blonde St. Germain laughed.

"Queen Anne's existence isn't the issue. I searched and searched but never found anything. She was probably a fabrication after all. But what matters, Aihana, is that there is a loophole in the legend of the sword. There is still a possibility of a twin sister Anne and room for whispers of a shield to match the sword. The king and traitor were slain together and it ended there. *Except it didn't.* It isn't a dead end and it isn't over. Yes, the shield is what I wanted. That and the person who was chosen by the shield. I wanted to meet the one who would travel the world with Excalibur's counterpart in hand."

St. Germain laughed again.

For that, she was willing to be called a liar behind her back. She was willing to be called a con man as she slipped into the money-obsessed high society. She was willing to do it all again and again. And she said it all with a reminiscent look on her face.

"B-but if that's the case, why are you in Academy City? I don't entirely understand, but shouldn't you be searching in European countries like…um…England or France?"

"I did. I searched and searched and searched for about 1500 years without finding a thing. And then I realized something. I could not find it no matter how thoroughly I scoured the world, so I asked myself where I had yet to search."

Aihana Etsu gulped as if swallowing some sweet honey.

"You don't mean…"

"Academy City. A surprising blind spot, isn't it? No place is more removed from magic and mystery. And yet in emergencies, this headquarters of the science side contacts the magic side via the Anglican Church. It is not a bad place to store a legend born in Britain. In fact, the Index Librorum Prohibitorum is apparently stored here, so I should have noticed the possibility of such an exception more quickly," she said. "You asked why I am here. Well, I have a single reason."

With a heavy thud, she pressed the bottom of a giant golden glowing shield into the gravel garden.

“This is the shield to match the sword. Out of respect to a certain fantasy, I call it Anne’s Shield. Even in our world, Queen Anne is an allusion to someone that does not exist, just like the mirage of a desert oasis. While it is paired with the sword, it would be wrong to call it the king’s shield seeing as he never touched it even once. And since it never appears in the legend, there is no mention or proof that anyone else owned it either. Since its owner is unknown, calling it Queen Anne’s Shield is perfect, is it not?”

Someone that does not exist.

The mirage of a desert oasis.

The blonde St. Germain claimed to have searched for this for many long years.

Her words were self-deprecating, but they also contained the joy of being freed from those bonds.

“The Dianoid is said to function as a giant vault to hide the various ‘secrets’ of the elites. Given the line drawn between the science side and magic side, *wouldn’t this be the perfect place to hide something you did not want found*?”

“…”

“Anne’s Shield was scheduled to be transported to the TV station in a disguised container, but now I have it. I swiped it while this city’s #4 was focused on my other selves.”

The blonde St. Germain smiled thinly in the moonlight.

Her first goal had been retrieving the shield, but that was not her only goal.

She had something else.

“In the end, I never managed to prove Queen Anne existed. Magic is both a field of knowledge and a set of techniques, but it seems Anne’s Shield has a safety lock based on blood and it will only activate for someone with matching genetic information. But that is an issue of probability that people often call coincidence. I only had to find someone whose genetic information was similar enough to the bloodline and bloodstains on the few items the king left behind. That was another way in which Academy City was an extremely efficient organization. For their powers development, each school stores DNA maps of its students. Once I had the data recoded from the items left by the king, it was all a search away. It was much like trying keys in a lock. Of course, that required finding someone able to do that and *turning them into St. Germain*.”

“That’s…unbelievable…”

“How? I went through it, piece by piece, explaining it all.”

“But… Queen Anne? Excalibur’s counterpart? This is Academy City, the headquarters of the science world where psychic powers have been created with technology. This…this isn’t where you would find some historical figure from a thick book written on parchment.”

“Ha ha. That is only the side of Academy City you are familiar with.”

“?”

“Ladylee Tangleroad, Fräulein Kreutune, and Dragon. Even this city contains some beings that that cannot be explained with the official version of science. You just haven’t been told about them. Or rather, a truly perfect version of science is that much harder to come by. Just as there is no such thing as a 100.0% pure diamond.”

“Eh? What? Wait…”

“I suppose throwing all that at you so quickly was too much. But is it that strange if you think about it rationally? Think of the British Halloween that occurred during the coup d’etat in England. That clash of modern weapons and countless legends is said to have been a fantastical bout of mass hysteria, but why was it Curtana that made its appearance there? Why was something as well-known as Excalibur nowhere to be seen? Doesn’t that feel like a puzzle piece was missing? To me, it seems natural to assume it was hidden away somewhere else.”

Aihana Etsu’s mind was approaching panic.

The words just kept coming so smoothly and readily that he could instinctually tell this woman was not just adlibbing. There was some logic below it all that he was unaware of. Just like with a book written in a foreign language, he felt his lack of understanding came from a flaw on his end.

In that case…

If St. German was correct, some child in Academy City had been born with the qualities needed to activate this legendary shield. And it was not due to bloodline; it was a complete coincidence.

Just how astronomical were the odds that this person had won against? It had not been determined before their birth and no one around them had arranged for it to happen. Acquiring the shield had truly been entirely up to luck and they had been selected out of the nearly infinite possible arrangements. This absurdly good luck was like randomly hitting keys when entering a password and getting into the highest level of security on the first try.

What kind of person were they?

For just a moment, Aihana Etsu truly wondered that.

He assumed they were entirely different from him, an awkward and useless Level 0 who could not even get into a building without using someone else’s ID card.

But then St. Germain pointed her raised index finger toward Aihana Etsu’s small nose.

“It is you I have yearned for, my beloved king of the shield.”

X X X X

A loud clanking rang through the darkness.

Hamazura’s Power Lifter was climbing the vertical elevator shaft by brute force. The steel machine had enough strength to achieve the speeds of a small car.

Kamijou was clinging to the back engine unit, but…

“Oh? Ohhhhhh!! Wh-wh-wha-wha-what!? It’s shaking, it’s shaking, it’s shaking, what’s going on, it’s shaking!!”

“Aneri!! I know he attacked us out of the blue earlier, but he isn’t an enemy! Don’t shake him off!!”

After Hamazura's shouted command, the Power Lifter finally stopped its unnatural shaking.

His situation prevented him from even wiping the sweat from his brow, so Kamijou got to the topic at hand with a tremble in his voice.

"T-to be honest, I'm most afraid of St. Germain making Aihana Etsu use magic."

"Magic?"

Hamazura's question caused Aneri to start a search, but it had no internet connection and could only pull data from the temporary files left by previous searches. And the only data it found was from game walkthrough sites or videos of Hawaii and Denmark, so it was completely useless.

"Birdway explained it to you before, remember? I guess it would be easiest to think of it as a kind of supernatural power different from esper powers. But magic doesn't rely on innate talent, so apparently even we could shoot fire or ice from our hands if we wanted to. …Well, I'm not sure about me. Imagine Breaker would probably mess with it."

Kamijou said it all so readily, but it would be a huge deal if it was true.

Hamazura himself had seen magicians in Hawaii and during the entire Fräulein Kreutune affair, but having that possibility presented to him anew was enough to make him feel dizzy.

This was an opportunity to destroy the hierarchy set up by Academy City.

Level 0s could break free of that title.

The Parameter List would lose all meaning.

It would bring so many happy changes.

However, Kamijou was not done speaking.

And what he said next destroyed all that.

"It's not all good, though. Especially for Academy City espers that use magic."

His tone suggested he found this utterly despicable.

Hamazura frowned, so he gave the answer.

"It seems esper powers and magic come into conflict inside the body. When an esper uses magic, it causes an awful malfunction. It damages the body's blood vessels and nerves. In the worst case, they just die."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. Of course, this is all known from failed experiments. It's probably only useful *as a way to bind a far-too-powerful magician*."

Kamijou sounded annoyed with the possibility that came to mind.

"So if St. Germain convinces Aihana to oppose us, it creates two dangers. The first is obviously the threat to our lives, but the second is that he'll be forced to unwittingly play Russian roulette."

The damage was not something that accumulated. The side effect of using magic simply caused damage in some random part of the body, so it was entirely possible the carotid artery would be taken out the very first time.

“This isn’t good,” muttered Hamazura while operating the Power Lifter. “This definitely isn’t good. It’s just cruel and I can’t stand that.”

“That’s why we’re going to do something about it.”

“And that’s why we need to find Frenda’s ‘real’ secret, hm?”

With a loud bang, Hamazura kicked through the wooden-looking elevator door and entered the elevator hall with Kamijou.

It was not an issue of a specific location or object.

As soon as they breathed in, they could tell they were horribly out of place here. It was like finding you had wandered into a silent art museum while playing loud music on a handheld music player.

They were in the upper level apartment area.

The rooms themselves were valuable enough without even thinking about what was inside.

And they apparently functioned as vaults to hide secrets instead of as a place to live, so VIPs with too much money would buy them for peace of mind.

Unlike normal dorms or apartments, the entrances were sliding double doors. At this height, a piano could not be brought in through the window using a crane, so the front entrance needed to be large enough for most anything. Of course, those doors would be made to prevent any kind of forced entry.

Aneri began a search to gather information on the entire high-class apartment area. Communications were very nearly cut off, but there may have been a local system accessible within the building.

Based on the gathered information, the place was just like the secret banks in Switzerland or the Cayman Islands. As soon as the secret was out, it lost all value. If just one room was broken into, every client would begin to question the “peace of mind” that was the biggest selling point.

Despite knowing that, Hamazura readily spoke up.

“I’ll handle the lock.”

“I’m counting on you. But first we have to figure out which room belongs to that Frenda girl.”

X X X X

He did not understand.

“Eh? What? Um, what???”

Thrown by the sudden announcement, Aihana Etsu blinked and the St. Germain in a bunny girl tailcoat made her next presentation.

Yes.

Just like a knight before his king, she bent her knee and lowered her head.

All while holding the glittering golden Anne's Shield.

"Ahh, do you understand, master of the shield to match the sword? You are a positive gap in the lattice. You bring about a unique change that I cannot as an orderly lattice of carbon. Do you have any idea how long I had dreamed of this before reaching this point?"

Her lowered head kept her expression hidden, but emotion escaped into her voice.

She was overwhelmed by emotion.

That was the only way to describe the passion in her voice.

"People can call me a mere illusionist if they wish. I do not mind if they spit on me and call me a con artist. But. The one thing I can never allow is for someone to deny everything I have believed in. Yes. I have finally been rewarded. I had my body torn apart as I swam through the sea of pretentious nobles who were filled with nothing but money and desire. But that near infinite effort and pain has finally borne fruit. Do you have any idea how this feels?"

The blonde St. Germain took Aihana Etsu's hand. She pulled it toward her and attempted to place the back of the hand on her cheek.

She was such a great existence.

And yet this was much like petting a faithful hound's head as a reward after capturing its prey.

However, Aihana refused.

He gathered his strength and pulled his hand back to himself.

"No, I don't."

He no longer had any resources left to use on his act.

He simply spoke the words that came to mind.

"You can't expect me to believe that! And what about you? We only just met, so you don't know what kind of person I am. How…how can you lower your head so easily? How can you hand your dream over to me!?"

"Why? Because standing above others is not what I desire after truly mastering magic."

"Magic?"

"The legend of that sword includes a man who mastered all sorts of magic, but he never thought of becoming king himself. He only supported the king's rule," said St. Germain with her head still respectfully lowered. "I am the same. I have mastered magic, but I have no intention of calling myself a god of magic. I required this skill to achieve my goal, but it would make no sense to lose myself in that power. Rather than be a magician or a Magic God, I only needed to become the unique being that is St. Germain. I wish to be a third category that can only be described with the term 'St. Germain', just as people do not refer to diamonds as charcoal. That is why I placed myself to the side of the legend's peak. I wished to meet the true king who was worthy of my service. But when St. Germain came into being, that king no longer lived. And the value of the sword piercing the earth was not its sharp edge; it was its ability to select a ruler capable of resolving a

great problem. The legend had come to an end and the king was dead, but as long as I had the sword, it was possible I could select a new king for each coming age. But the sword too had been lost. And so I searched. I searched and searched and searched. The scales of Anubis and the spear of the Valkyrie. There are plenty of legends concerning the judgment of people's souls and the deeds they have committed, but the only legend that matched my goal was Anne's Shield. And the answer that shield chose…was you."

Aihana Etsu gasped.

"Bloodline is certainly important in the king's legend, but it is not absolute. It may be due to an incidental similarity, but Anne's Shield has chosen you, just as machine oil finds the diamond among the rocks. The miniscule odds of this meeting are a sign that the age itself desires the arrival of a new king."

He placed a hand on his chest and thought about what he was being told.

And he spoke in a trembling voice as if hesitantly reaching toward the head of a new hound.

"Are you really…not planning anything else? Do you really only want to serve me?"

"It is because they do not see what I gain that people fail to understand me and view me as a con artist. That fact has allowed me to find the king and it is the single trump card that could overpower even those Magic Gods. I overpower magicians and spurn the Magic Gods as they urge me to join their ranks. I remain the truly stable crystal that is St. Germain. They arrogantly call themselves Magic Gods, but they are nothing more than counselors without a king. They are a foolish group that has yet to realize that *true power* cannot be obtained as an individual. On the other hand, I have obtained you as a nucleus. Ahh, if Othinus had only come to understand Kamijou Touma before losing her power, she might have walked a different path."

"…"

"My king, if I am not mistaken, that look on your face says you do not believe you have any power or that anyone would serve you."

Still kneeling, St. Germain continued talking as if to unravel the mystery one piece at a time.

"But if you think about it, that is only natural. England left a rare form of magical talent in Academy City. It would have been a waste to destroy that talent by rudely developing esper powers over it. Simply put, you were given placebos identical to the proper Curriculum. That is why you have no power. They had no choice but to label you a Level 0. It was all so your true ability could emerge at this moment."

Each individual piece of information linked together.

That shield had seemed as distant as the other side of the planet or even Pluto, but it was gradually falling within reach. It all began to feel strangely real as if there was no other way to explain the many failures and humiliations of his life.

"You are the positive gap and it all lies within your grasp."

The blonde St. Germain intently raised her head and gave her king a suggestion.

"I will grant you any magic you wish. It can be the other Magic Gods, the unreasonable rules of this world, or anything else you find even the slightest bit unpleasant. You need only point it out to me and I promise I will immediately obliterate that obstacle."

What if his position as a Level 0 had meaning?

What if he had a special talent that anyone would be envious of and what if he had a bright and shining stardom that would guide him the rest of the way?

That would bring such happiness to his life.

It would give such meaning to everything leading up to this.

“Aihana Etsu” was not a strong person. In all his humiliating days of being branded powerless, could he truly say he had never looked up to the stories of the Ugly Duckling or Cinderella? Could he truly say he had never wished he would not share the fate of the Little Match Girl?

But…

“That…”

Aihana Etsu shook his head, sending a sweet aroma scattering from his semi-long hair.

He had no intention of touching the golden shield held before him.

“That isn’t what I want.”

“…”

“It’s true I’m small. It’s true I’ve always regretfully wished I had some convenient hidden talent or true power no one had ever noticed. It’s true I couldn’t even get in here without faking my identity. But this isn’t it.”

He tried to pull away from St. Germain.

“There’s something wrong if I have to hurt people to prove my power. That isn’t what I want to do. Isn’t power meant to protect? It may be wrong for me to talk about this since I don’t have any power, but even without any power, I’ve managed to come this far without hurting anyone.”

“Is that so?”

“So I can’t do this. If that power requires hurting people, then I can’t accept it.”

“Even so, let me ask once more: Are you sure?”

She spoke with a sincere voice, yet it sounded like the whispers of a demon.

“Have you forgotten that I told you to search for the last vestiges of Frenda Seivelun?”

“…!!!???”

“Not her possessions, but the last vestiges of her. Surely you are not so foolish that you do not realize the alternate wording changes the meaning, just like with diamond and charcoal.”

She smiled.

And smiled.

And smiled.

St. Germain activated her ultimate weapon, the ability to flatter others.

“And there is always a reason behind people’s deaths. Once you run across that reason, will you truly be able to say you have no use for a power that hurts others?”

X X X X

Countless double sliding doors lined the hall and the same scene filled several floors, so it seemed impossible to find Frenda Seivelun’s hideout without any kind of hint.

“It doesn’t look like the room numbers are arranged in any kind of order. Did they let the client choose whatever number they wanted?”

However, they received some unexpected help.

Hamazura Shiage spoke up from his Power Lifter.

“Between 0 and 9, she preferred 9.”

“?”

“Between 1 and 8, 1. Between 2 and 7, 7. Between 3 and 6, 6. Between 4 and 5…”

Aneri seemed to be using its learning function to analyze the pattern, but it required some input from the pilot.

Finally, Hamazura raised his head and gestured Kamijou forward.

“This way, probably. C’mon.”

The two of them walked down the hallway. The distance between doors suggested each room was given quite a bit of space, but there were still a lot of them. Even so, Hamazura took an almost direct path to their destination.

Confused, Kamijou asked about it.

“You know that much about her?”

“We didn’t know each other for long, but she had a bad habit of using the same password for everything because she hated remembering different ones for everything. That restricted Mugino and Kinuhata quite a lot too. Okay, this is the place.”

They stood in front of one of the sliding doors.

It appeared to be made of wood, but it was of course a carbon material. It would probably survive having a car crash into it.

But once Hamazura climbed down from the Power Lifter, he traced his fingers over the surface of the door.

The two-ton piece of heavy machinery entered autonomous standby mode and observed the lock’s structure over the boy’s shoulder.

“So it’s a Method Pin Type 29? They claim it’s theoretically impossible to illegally copy the key, but I should be able to manage with this.”

“How are you going to open it?”

“Think about it in reverse. The key can’t be copied and the lock can’t be drilled, picked, or melted. …So what if the owner loses their key? Will the room never be opened again? If the self locking door trapped a baby inside, that would lead to a death.”

“Oh.”

“Naturally, the lock maker doesn’t want to be responsible for the actions of a stupid customer, so they always hide an emergency way to unlock it or to remove and swap out the lock. They don’t tell the customers that, of course. It entirely defeats the purpose of the lock.”

Kamijou watched Hamazura work but had no idea what he was doing. However he did it, Hamazura quickly removed the entire lock, pressed on a latch inside, and unlocked the door. The door was made so a grand piano or home theater system could be brought in, so the entire Power Lifter could fit into the entranceway.

Once they opened the double sliding doors, they found a large space.

However, it was more than just one room.

“It’s an apartment, but this looks like an inn’s entranceway,” commented Kamijou. “Wow, there’s even stairs.”

“This thing’s just like a villa that costs hundreds of millions of yen, right? Anyway, this is Frenda’s hideout. Takitsubo’s one thing, but I’m curious what she was hiding even from Mugino and Kinuhata.”

“?”

“Whatever’s hiding in here, we just have to pray it isn’t an explosives plant. Knowing Frenda, there might be a self-destruct device set up to destroy the evidence.”

The apartment showed no sign of having been lived in, but that was not just because its owner had been gone for a long time.

While it had been an apartment, it had not been made to live in. It was more like an extremely high-class closet. Or maybe a vault to store anything one wanted to ensure was kept safe.

Kamijou and Hamazura could not say for sure without doing a thorough search, but this floor alone seemed to have well over five rooms. How much more would they find if they climbed the stairs to another floor?

“Listen. Be careful when you step on the floorboards, don’t carelessly open the sliding screens, don’t touch any switches, don’t mess with any weird devices you find, don’t get caught by any tripwires or infrared beams, watch out for ultrasonic waves and microwaves, and be very careful of anything that looks like a vegetable or potted plant. Just like a top-class pastry chef can recreate any kind of sweet, she might have camouflaged the materials she used.”

“What’s left that I *can* do?”

Whatever they said, their only option was to check all of the sliding screens.

They started with the screen straight ahead in the large hall of an entranceway.

“Normally, this would lead to the living room.”

“With a place this size, it could easily be a game room or projection room. But this is a giant storeroom, so it won’t have any kind of normal use. I just hope we don’t find a ton of fuel-air bombs in there.”

“Just out of curiosity, who exactly was this Frenda?”

“The only thing worth knowing is that she was Fremea’s older sister.”

After an overly thorough examination of the area around the screen, Hamazura grabbed the knob with the Power Lifter’s large steel hand.

Threat Level: Undetermined.

Aneri’s warning meant they could find just about anything on the other side.

“Listen. Go any further and it’s at your own risk. If things look dangerous, get to the ground. If you only take action once the bomb has already detonated, it’s too late.”

Frenda had hidden something even from the rest of Item.

Aihana Etsu had desired whatever it was so he could pursue his missing friend.

Hamazura thought for just a moment, but then he moved the mechanical hand on the knob.

And he slid it to the side.

X X X X

“To be honest.”

The female St. Germain wore a stage magician’s outfit that resembled a bunny suit and jacket and she kneeled in the moonlit garden.

“I have not dug that deeply into the issue surrounding Frenda Seivelun. I am an outsider, after all.”

“…”

Aihana Etsu slowly looked back at St. Germain’s face.

A few strands of hair had blown in the night wind and caught between her lips.

The woman with white skin and long, wavy blonde hair laughed.

“Still, I know as much as I do because of the Dianoid. This is a giant storehouse that Academy City’s VIPs pay good money to hide their secrets in. No place could be more useful for learning the secrets of others.”

“Did you see her room?”

“No.” St. Germain shook her head. “The Dianoid stores more than physical collections. It also contains carbon-based and organic-based DNA computers. Simply put, it has also taken over management of digital possessions. I can directly manipulate those, so I could not help but make use of it.”

“Then it was in there?”

“It was.” St. Germain pulled a pill from her pill case. “But it was more trouble than I would have liked since I had to access the DNA computer directly. Even if the machine itself is carbon based, it still uses fiber optic cables. I can control the machine, but I cannot touch the cables. That means I cannot use the extensive security camera network. Such a shame.”

“That doesn’t matter,” cut in Aihana Etsu.

He no longer observed her expression or feared the changes in her waves of emotion, but was that because the submissiveness of this powerful monster was producing a change inside him?

Or were his brakes no longer functioning now that his goal had been placed right before his eyes?

A somehow dangerous relaxation came over him. He moved his darkened eyes and half-opened lips as he continued.

“You said before that her room contains the ‘last vestiges’ of her. How much do you know? What did you learn in the Dianoid?”

“Do you want to know, my king?”

“Answer me.”

“Even if it will cause you to regret every last one of your decisions?”

“Answer me, St. Germain!!”

The blonde woman snapped her fingers.

Another of those playing the role of St. Germain held a notebook-sized tablet toward Aihana Etsu.

Without even thinking, he took it and listened to the St. Germain who resembled a grown Frenda.

“Now see for yourself, king of the shield. This is the regret you have chosen.”

Whether he heard those words or not, he definitely saw what that screen displayed.

In an instant, his mind was filled by several images.

An overpass with a subway track running below.

A boy and a girl speaking together.

The object that girl dragged in one hand like a burst stuffed animal.

A familiar friend.

Red and black.

Far too much missing.

A torso.

Torn-apart and disturbing colors.

Long, wavy blonde hair and white skin had lost all life and looked more like dried papier-mâché, empty eyes reflected nothing, the color red trailed down from the corner of the mouth, the long body was missing everything from the lower torso and below, something soft and colorful dangled stickily down from the violently torn edge, the path along which it had been roughly dragged was obvious thanks to the grotesque clumps that had fallen to the-

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!???"

The next thing he knew, Aihana Etsu was screaming uncontrollably.

He had not heard anything from his friend for quite a while. She had seemed to live in a different world from him and this worst case scenario had crossed his mind, but he had come this far in order to prove it wrong. If he could clear away all of the gathering darkness and let the light in, he had hoped to eliminate his fears. He had thought the usual scenery would return and he could smile with his friend once more.

But…

What was this?

This went beyond a stabbing, a strangling, or a bullet to the head.

"Ah…aahh…aaahhh…"

His tear glands let loose.

All that remained after screaming was a despondency much like deterioration and an absolutely empty mind. His limbs hung limply and his eyes stayed open like a broken doll. His resolve and determination had been crushed. His torrent of emotions had nowhere else to go, so they took the form of tears.

This was awful.

It was horrible.

It was too much.

There may have been no fundamental difference in people's deaths. Whether the corpse was perfectly preserved or torn to pieces, they were still just as dead. But then what was this he saw on the screen? Just what kind of sins did one have to bear to deserve a death like that? Her body had been torn in two, dragged along the ground, and shown off like a present.

He had always thought it was over once someone died.

That was why he had refused to accept this death and taken a step into the city's darkness.

But he had been wrong.

There was more after their death.

Would they have a proper burial to preserve their dignity or would they be dug up and crushed underfoot?

“Have you heard of this, my king?”

St. Germain gave a ripple-like laugh and spoke further.

“A new type of bomb lies hidden in the Dianoid.”

“…”

“And surely you had at least somewhat suspected that Frenda Seivelun had strayed from the proper path.”

“Are you saying that’s what she left behind?”

“That is hard for me to say.”

At that point, a rumble reached them and the entire rooftop shook violently.

Aihana Etsu looked overhead without thinking and St. Germain whispered to him.

“I suppose that would be Mugino Shizuri.”

“Who’s that?”

“The girl in that footage. She is currently taking out St. Germains just like me.”

A strange trembling and numb sensation reached the tips of Aihana Etsu’s fingers.

That was the person who had done “this”.

And it was not just isolated to the past. The monster was producing violence even now.

“Make no mistake, my king. Mugino Shizuri is not what matters here.”

“She doesn’t matter?”

He was left speechless.

After all, she had done “this”. If not for her, that would never have happened to his friend.

But St. Germain explained.

“As a hypothetical example, what if a deadly fight broke out over a single scrap of bread in a war-torn nation? Whose responsibility is that? The rules of the world had been distorted, so shouldn’t the crimes of those directly involved only be weighed after the distorted system was judged?”

“…”

“That story was a tragedy,” said St. Germain. “But the saddest part of all is that the story did not have all the necessary elements. If a single gear had been in its proper place, that horrific event never would have happened.”

“What are you talking about!?” shrilly shouted Aihana Etsu. “What else is there!?”

St. Germain answered her king.

"*Kamijou Touma was not present in that story.*"

At first, that comment may have seemed nonsensical.

But when it was someone with true strength, that changed entirely.

"That is all it was. That alone turned everything around by 180 degrees. So there is no real meaning in taking your complaints to Mugino Shizuri, Kakine Teitoku, or anyone else directly involved. Not to start with anyway. First, you judge the system, remove the filter that system placed on the situation, and then weigh the crimes of those involved. If you still find excess fat, then you can scrape it away until everything has been settled. I am not trying to protect Mugino Shizuri. But if crimes are not judged properly, you cannot take pride in your revenge."

It did not feel real to Aihana Etsu. He had occasionally heard the name Kamijou Touma while wandering the back alleys, but this was far too extreme and he could not decide how much of it he could believe.

And so he asked.

"If…"

"Yes?"

"If Kamijou Touma had made it there, what would have happened to my friend?"

It may have been a meaningless question.

What good were hypotheticals about the past?

But…

"*He would of course have saved someone with that fist of his. He may have the body of a fragile human child, but at this very moment, he is gaining the upper hand against a higher being such as myself.*"

She made it sound obvious.

She made it sound like having her plans ruined had been part of her plan.

She made it sound like one needed to allow for that much when dealing with him.

It was possible that pointy-haired boy had walked a path like that.

But…

(Why didn't anyone make it in time?)

Judge the system.

Do not hate the madness; expose the conditions that had led to it.

(It didn't matter who, so why wasn't there a single person there to hear her scream?)

A grinding came from Aihana Etsu's mouth as he clenched his back teeth.

He could tell something in his heart was turning in a strange direction.

“What will you do?”

St. Germain held the golden shield once more.

“Mugino Shizuri is undoubtedly more evil than good. If you kill her, you could call your revenge a success. …But is that enough? Making a judgment without bringing all the evil to light is no more than canceling out the crime. Killing two people and killing two hundred people receive the exact same death penalty, but you would never accept it if a killer of two hundred was executed for just two of those deaths, would you?”

“…”

“And as things are, what Frenda Seivelun left behind will eventually be brought to light. If it is misused, it will posthumously sully her name.”

The golden shield reflected the moonlight.

As she kneeled, the look in St. Germain’s eyes spoke clearly to Aihana Etsu.

What one *could* not do and what one *did* not do were entirely different.

And the power that divided the two categories sat before his eyes.

“Fine then,” he muttered.

His small hand reached for the golden shield.

“I’ll clear everything up. And to do that, I can wait to deal with a definite answer like Mugino Shizuri. Kamijou Touma comes first. How much was he involved and how much was he unable to be involved? I’ll figure all of that out.”

“That is fine. If such a thing as heaven exists, I am sure your friend is smiling down on you.”

“…”

He did not speak the rest aloud, but he continued in his head.

(If Kamijou Touma’s presence could have changed her fate and I can say that the very act of not showing up in time was a crime…)

He felt the heavy shield in his hand.

(Then I’m guilty of the exact same crime. Once this is all over, I need to judge myself as well.)

“What can Anne’s Shield do?”

“The shield itself is not important. What matters is you now that it has chosen you. Just as the fact that the sword was pulled from the stone is seen as much more important than its sharp edge.”

“I don’t want to make a name for myself. I want something I can use right away.”

“Heh heh. I would like to leave that for a surprise once you use it, but I suppose I will give a general explanation. But understand that this is not the shield’s power. This is your power; Anne’s Shield merely prepared it inside of you.”

St. Germain spoke as if revealing a prized secret.

“King Arthur’s sword was a symbol of the active and positive side of ruling a kingdom through dominance and territorial expansion. As its counterpart, what would Anne’s Shield symbolize? The passive and negative side of ruling a kingdom.”

“Be more specific.”

“It can shoot down anything. This ultimate defensive spiritual item uses a minimum of light to tear into anything you hold it towards. It would create…yes, you could call it a straw-sized hole.”

“The ultimate? Really?”

“The materials do not matter and it has the ability to pierce through as many as two million knights at once. It is a horizontal downpour of death. Doesn’t that seem like enough to exceed the limits of Imagine Breaker and tear him to pieces?”

X X X X

Hamazura Shiage and Kamijou Touma found an unexpected sight beyond the sliding screen.

It was not a new type of bomb or an explosives plant.

“What…is this?”

Kamijou looked around the tatami mat living room that looked large enough for a home economics classroom.

It did not look lived in either. In fact, the furnishings were not numerous enough or positioned right for that.

Instead, the entire room was filled with boxes.

Some were as small as bento boxes and others were bigger than refrigerators.

The multicolored wrapping and ribbons reminded Hamazura of something.

“Christmas? No, this is…”

“Looks like birthday presents. And there’s a calendar over here.”

Kamijou pointed at the calendar thumbtacked to the wall. It contained pictures of sea creatures and was marked with a highlighter.

But not just one or two days.

In fact, more days had marks than did not.

Out of the corner of his eye, Hamazura saw Aneri recording the names written on the boxes and building up a database.

“Come to think of it, Frenda was the most well-connected member of Item. I think she said something about knowing thousands of people if you included everyone from the darkness and not.”

“Then this is…?”

“Are they all birthday presents? This looks like when a company prepares year-end gifts for everyone.”

Kamijou flipped through the calendar while listening to Hamazura’s almost shocked voice.

The calendar had not been updated for a few months now, but all of the birthdays had been written in ahead of time. He stopped after flipping through a few months.

December 1.

That was today’s date. The name written there was nothing like “Aihana Etsu”, but he recognized the face on the small photo sticker placed there.

“…”

“(I can see why she didn’t want Mugino or Kinuhata to see this.)”

Hamazura muttered to himself while looking around the room again.

Aneri’s scan picked up a few familiar names on the many boxes.

There were no traps, no weapons, and no ulterior motives.

This was Frenda’s most defenseless side.

This would have been where she sealed her softest side that was different from the side she showed in the normal world and the one she showed in the underground world. Here, she did not have to behave just right as Fremea’s sister or polish her deadly skills for underground work. This was her tiny shelter.

Everyone had multiple sides.

They were all real and none of them were faked.

If one were to judge Frenda Seivelun’s humanity based on every part of her, she would likely be judged an evil girl.

There was no excuse for everything she had blown up and all the lives she had taken.

When she won, she did not give the slightest thought to the feelings of those she had taken away. And if she was about to lose, she would suddenly start talking at length about the sanctity of life. When she killed, she enjoyed it. When she was going to be killed, she would sell out her teammates and desperately beg for her life. She was that kind of selfish and convenient girl.

But…

That fact did not wholly invalidate what they had found here.

A few remote controls were lined up on the edge of the table. What they belonged to was written on the color tape attached: TV, air conditioner, digital recorder, projector, curtains, etc. When Hamazura picked one up and hit the power button, the lines of a spreadsheet program appeared on the one wall left clear of presents. It was apparently a list of what she had discovered the different people wanted.

“Jaka-jaka-jan. …No, that’s not right. Jaka-jaka-jaka-jan! Is that it?”

The digital recorder contained a few videos Frenda had recorded of herself dancing.

Hamazura assumed she was practicing for some kind of entertainment at a birthday party, but…

“Jaka jaka jahn jan. There! In the end, it has to be that one. …Heh heh heh. Mugino’s gonna be so surprised.”

“…”

Hamazura watched that carefree smile.

She clearly did not have a single clue what was going to happen to her.

He quietly used the digital recorder’s remote to switch off the footage.

Deep in his heart, he told himself he could never let Mugino see that.

Kamijou finally looked away from the calendar.

“Aihana said we would find the reason Frenda Seivelun disappeared here, but should we just assume he was wrong about that?”

“Yeah. I doubt she left anything like *that* here,” spat out Hamazura before adding something else. “But it wasn’t entirely meaningless.”

That was when they noticed something flashing behind a pile of presents.

It was attached to the wall. Kamijou noticed it first and Hamazura noticed him turn toward it. They checked and found a flat-panel touchscreen and an attached phone receiver.

They initially thought it was an intercom, but it was not.

“What is this?”

The screen displayed a floorplan of the apartment and the main entrance was flashing red.

“Oh, I get it. It’s a security alert because I forced open the front door.”

Hamazura leaned forward from the Power Lifter and touched the screen.

“Hm? What the hell!?”

He may have used it wrong because the displayed floorplan flew from the screen.

And it instead displayed more than just the one apartment.

The entire Dianoid was shown in wireframe. Dozens or even hundreds of photograph thumbnails popped up here and there. They showed footage from near the building’s many entrances, inside the lower level shops, in front of the elevators and escalators, and inside the mid level TV station.

Kamijou spoke aloud the impression it gave him.

“Security cameras?”

“But why? This clearly goes beyond her room.”

“Maybe it’s a special privilege for the VIPs. To sell peace of mind, they handed over the other customers’ privacy.”

Aneri was not attached by any cables, but observations of the screen were enough to make some detailed predictions about how to operate the device.

This time, Hamazura controlled it like he wanted.

He checked the login history and found nothing except once right after the lease was signed. Frenda had likely noticed the device while checking through the apartment’s security and never touched it since. That meant she had not had it installed and it had come with the apartment.

During her underground jobs, she might have gladly used it. The more information she had, the more advantageous her position. And she had not been the type to worry about the privacy of others.

But her time in here had been different.

There had been no light or dark and no acting or truth. She had simply put together kind plans to give birthday presents to everyone she knew, so anything that might remind of her of the rotten truth was only in the way.

Annoyed, Hamazura removed his finger from the screen, but Kamijou reached in from the side.

He touched one of the countless thumbnails.

“Hey!”

“Wait a second. Look here.”

He interrupted Hamazura and expanded the security camera window.

It displayed a moonlit garden on the roof.

A boy stood surrounded by dozens of men in tailcoats.

He was speaking with a blonde woman wearing what looked like a bunny suit and jacket combination.

“That’s Aihana Etsu. Good, he’s still okay.”

“That’s him? He doesn’t look like the #6 to me. Not that a Level 0 is one to talk.”

Unlike normal video footage, security cameras did not provide sound.

Fortunately, Aneri displayed intermittent pieces of text at the bottom of the screen like movie subtitles.

“Come with me, my king of the shield.”

“How can you do so much? I’ve only ever heard of Kamijou Touma in rumors, but you know what his true power is, don’t you?”

“Didn’t I tell you? I have been searching for the king I can truly serve. And he is an excellent opponent to test the king’s power on. It is normal to take revenge and reclaim your rightful place.”

“Is this…really revenge?”

“If he had arrived in time, Frenda Seivelun would not have died. Isn’t that true? It may sound like a wild leap in logic, but *anyone who knows him* would certainly agree.”

“…Kamijou Touma.”

“The term Magic God may not mean much to you, but I assume you have at least heard the news and seen the videos from the incident in Denmark. That was a war waged against a single Magic God who had earned the entire world’s hatred. Even when faced with the deadly desires of six billion people, Kamijou Touma protected that Magic God to the very end. If he could do that, why did he have so much trouble against an element or two of Academy City’s darkness?”

“…”

“I went out of the way to break into the TV station and steal the container, so use that shield as much as you want.”

So Kamijou could hear, Hamazura read aloud the information Aneri gave him.

They only received bits and pieces of the conversation, so it was nearly impossible to accurately understand it all.

But they could make some guesses based on the ominous terms that got through.

“I don’t know what she’s talking about,” muttered Hamazura Shiage.

His confusion soon lifted his voice to a shout.

“We did transport a container to TV Orbit, *but that wasn’t a shield.* That container was for a show using cutting-edge technology to see just how accurately an antique German grandfather clock can keep time!!”

“…”

Kamijou narrowed his eyes.

Someone was lying. Was it the person who had made the order with Hamazura or was it St. Germain who insisted he had acquired the shield from that container?

Hamazura looked utterly confused.

“And what’s this about King Arthur? Isn’t that the king who shows up in RPGs?”

“That just shows how well-known he is. On the magic side, he might have been a real magician or Saint,” spat out Kamijou. “But Aihana’s from the science side, so would a name like that really be enough to convince him to act?”

“I kind of understand.” Hamazura thought for a moment. “Academy City is all about science, but the morning news still does the horoscope. It isn’t about logic. Everyone watches it even though they know it’s meaningless. If you only believe in Academy City’s rules, a Level 0 is a Level 0. The laws of physics seem pretty cruel when you’re weak. So you’d panic if you found out there was an entirely different set of rules out there, wouldn’t you?”

“…”

“If there’s a loophole, everyone wants to use it. Saying you have hidden talent or haven’t gotten serious yet are worn-out clichés for a reason. And with some great historical figure or famous weapon, it’s all prepared in advance, so gaining that for yourself would be like a dream come true. It would be like finding out you’re a blood relative of one of the seven Level 5s and have powerful genetic information hidden inside you.”

Hamazura had tried to give a calm answer, but he could tell the anger that had long burned deep in his gut was welling up as he spoke.

Cinderella and the Ugly Duckling may have been nothing but convenient fairy tales.

The heroes in children’s picture books did not put in any work themselves. They had special talent from the beginning and they only had to let some special person guide them the rest of the way. In a way, they could be called lazy. And perhaps the people who looked up to those fairy tales could be called the same.

But people only did that because they had no other option.

If they could change themselves with enough effort or if their efforts ever led to any noticeable results, no one would have had such a hard time of it. They were kept ignorant of the Parameter

List and their growth rate was managed for the convenience of the adults, but they still tried to pursue their dreams.

Talent that not even the owner was aware of may have been an illusion brought on by a weak heart.

Aihana Etsu may not have been a strong person for letting that get the better of him.

But…

Who had the right to mock him for it?

“What is St. Germain trying to have him do? I do know your name, Kamijou Touma, showed up in the conversation.”

“That’s it right there.” Kamijou narrowed his eyes slightly. “It’s the idea that it might have worked out if I had gotten there in time. Not that I’m that great a person. I’ve only achieved what I have by using every trick in the book and receiving the support of everyone around me.”

“What…the hell?”

“At the very least, I bet that’s the way Aihana Etsu sees it. Frenda Seivelun, was it? He thinks she died because I didn’t notice in that final moment.”

“What the hell is that!?”

Hamazura shouted in utter confusion.

If that argument was valid, it would mean Kamijou Touma was responsible the lives of all six or seven billion people on the planet. If even one of those lives were to slip from his grasp, the blame would lie on him.

That was a job for god.

And…

“That’s complete bull. You didn’t even know Frenda, right!? In that case, there’s no way she would have expected for you to come save her on the verge of death. Aihana and St. Germain aren’t speaking for her at all!!”

“No, they aren’t, but that’s not the real issue here.”

Kamijou spoke calmly and thought of the many magicians and espers he had clashed with in the past.

“People out for revenge aren’t looking at reality. It’s pretty common for them to pretend they’re acting on behalf of the dead while actually being manipulated by what they themselves think. So Aihana Etsu’s hypothetical doesn’t need to be consistent.”

“But!!”

Hamazura’s words caught in his throat, so he slowly took a breath and started again.

“It’s true that incident was horrific. Everyone went insane, the normal safe zones were violated, and the ideals the adults love to talk about so much didn’t apply in the slightest. Frenda died and a lot of other people died. The most I could do was bring it all to an end and I can’t proudly say I actually ‘resolved’ anything.”

“…”

“But we were all putting our lives on the line there! Everyone involved was a horrible person, but we kept pushing onward through the blood in the hopes of survival!! So what is this about Kamijou Touma’s presence? To hell with that! That spits in the face of all our efforts there. It shoves us to the sidelines and says it’s all decided by Kamijou Touma alone, no matter how much work we put in!!”

“I know that.” Kamijou shook his head. “The world doesn’t revolve around me. It’s ridiculous to think I’m looking down on people when I rescue them. I’m just fighting for my own selfish desires and creating the

future I want to see. I'm not doing anything grand enough that you could claim I'm stealing other people's achievements."

But some people did not realize that.

Without relying on that illusion, some people could not accept the fact that they had lost someone.

It was no different from Cinderella or the Ugly Duckling.

It was an illusion created by a weak heart, but who had the right to look down on them and mock them for it?

"So…what? What is St. Germain trying to have Aihana do to you?"

"Probably not just kill me. If so, St. Germain could just do it himself. He can attack from every direction which is perfect for getting around my right hand, so there's no reason to add in an uncertain element like a complete stranger."

"Then…"

"It's the opposite," spat out Kamijou in annoyance. "Remember the side effects when an esper uses magic? I don't know what exactly that shield does, but I doubt it would be all that useful against me. St. Germain wants to pit Aihana Etsu against me and then have Aihana die. He wants me to bear the sin of murder. That's his goal here."

"Why!?"

"That I don't know. …Maybe he wants to defile the 'weak illusion' we talked about before."

There was no consistency to St. Germain's actions.

Despite supposedly being obsessed with Aihana Etsu, he had sealed the Dianoid and tried to kill Kamijou and the others. None of that was necessary if he only wanted access to Aihana Etsu.

But a change of viewpoint cleared that up.

Aihana Etsu was not at the center. He was only a part of the whole. St. Germain was using Aihana Etsu to either kill Kamijou or make him suffer. A battle against St. Germain might be difficult, but if he caused the death of Aihana Etsu who had only been deceived, things changed.

Say someone desperately fought off a man-eating tiger that attacked them. Now say they crushed a sleeping kitten underfoot. In both scenarios, they were taking a single life, but the thorn in their heart would be vastly different.

Perhaps it would even be enough to greatly change Kamijou Touma himself.

That pointy-haired boy had occasionally heard people allude to the "nature of Kamijou Touma". He was not aware of it, but perhaps there was something special others had seen inside him. He may have found a hint there if he could speak with Ollerus or Othinus, but he could not.

And of course, a sickening heat roiled inside Kamijou.

"To hell with this. You don't just get to decide that Aihana Etsu is weak. That bastard St. Germain is making up his own standards and shoving Aihana into the expendable category!!"

“Wait just a second. Don’t tell me you’re thinking of going and saving Aihana Etsu. The details might be twisted beyond recognition, but he’s still trying to kill you!”

“So what? Didn’t I tell you I’m not looking down on people when I rescue them and I’m just fighting to create the future I want to see? So it doesn’t matter if he hates me or isn’t asking for help! I’ll drag him out of this by force if I have to!!”

Hamazura Shiage brought a hand to his forehead inside the Power Lifter.

He now understood where the other boy got the weak illusion that led him to save anyone and everyone.

(He claims to be selfish through and through, but when that selfish desire is to protect everyone’s smiles, it makes you just like a legit hero.)

And he decided going along with this was not that bad an idea.

“So what exactly are you going to do? Even if you want to go save him, he’s surrounded by St. Germain, he has a weapon with a deadly side effect, and who knows if we’ll have the time to convince him he’s wrong.”

“We just have to get rid of what’s motivating him.”

Kamijou must have been thinking even as he answered because he spoke quickly.

“To make sure he doesn’t get hit by the side effect of magic, we need to launch a surprise attack or something to get the shield away from him.”

“And after that?”

“…”

“Wait a second. Don’t tell me!”

“Even if it’s a farce and completely misplaced, Aihana Etsu is being motivated by revenge. If we fulfill that desire, he’ll stop, so there’s no reason to overthink this. He just has to hit me until he’s satisfied. With, um…oh, right. With Mitsuari Ayu it was the same…*I think*.”

“But then what about you!?”

“I’m not just gonna sit there and let him kill me. It’s not like I want to die. So don’t worry. I’m fairly confident in my ability to take a punch.”

Kamijou smiled thinly.

“But that’s another reason why we need to take away his shield at the very beginning. …And my not wanting to die and the mix of feelings filling Aihana are two different issues. I doubt he’ll stop just because I tell him I don’t want to die. I don’t know how the incident in Denmark looked to him or anything, but I need to pay him back for the false hope I gave him.”

Those were frightening words.

That thought process was somehow different from the hero Hamazura had thought he was a moment before.

Hamazura recalled the fairy tale of The Happy Prince he had heard as a child. A statue of a prince was decorated in gold and jewels and, with the help of a passing bird, it had shared the pieces of its body with the

poor people of the city. Kamijou Touma claimed to be selfishly doing whatever it was he wanted, but his logic had a tendency to treat only himself as a pawn to be used.

How many veils would one have to remove before finding the true selfishness below?

Or in some twisted way, was this Kamijou Touma's version of selfishness?

"Listen. Once Aihana Etsu fulfills his desire for revenge, he won't have any reason to fight. And once St. Germain's plan falls apart, he'll attack from every side. …I'll be relying on your Power Lifter. Make sure you at least get Aihana out of there."

Hamazura was unable to immediately reply.

But then…

"…?"

A new red dot appeared at the base of the wireframe representation of the building.

It was the same type of warning that had flashed when they had broken into Frenda's room. It indicated something was wrong, so something had to be happening there.

Kamijou reached his index finger toward the flat-panel touchscreen.

And when he touched the flashing dot, the screen displayed…

X X X X

Perhaps due to the difference in air pressure when the door slid open, a dully violent gust of wind washed over the St. Germains as they walked into the Dianoid's basement.

This group had not gone with Aihana Etsu and they had a clear goal.

"Academy City's ideas are always so shocking. I have my own ideas on the control of carbon, but this is a gene I lack."

They were all St. Germain and they would all think the same thing when they saw this, but it was part of his personality to speak it aloud in a theatrical manner.

Some were old, some were young, some were men, and some were women.

A middle-aged male St. Germain spoke for all of them.

"The Dianoid. Yes, the Dianoid. This setup certainly is grand enough to warrant such a name."

The panel at his feet was as clear as glass.

As the Dianoid was entirely made of carbon materials, it likely had properties similar to diamond.

What lay at his feet was the secret hidden in District 15's greatest landmark.

Yes.

At the base of the Dianoid, the 120 thousand ton building floated ten centimeters off the surface of the earth.

One way to protect buildings from earthquakes was to float them a few centimeters off the ground with the power of air. That would protect them from the tremors.

But that only applied to normal houses.

It was impossible to lift up a seventy story building and keep it standing without it losing balance.

Normally, that is.

"A graviton-style artificial gravity control device, hm?" St. Germain smiled. "Diamonds are slowly formed when carbon molecules are compressed deep underground. To put it another way, artificial diamonds require mankind to reproduce that extreme high pressure environment. …But on this level, it goes beyond a mere laboratory. This can probably produce diamonds like candy in a factory."

And….

This secret usage of the Dianoid could do more than reliably mass-produce artificial diamonds.

For example…

"A black hole bomb…well, maybe not that much. A dwarf star bomb is probably the most they can manage."

Rumors filled the underside of the city that a new type of bomb was hidden in the Dianoid. Anyone who was familiar with the name Frenda Seivelun had assumed that secret was related to her, but…

"You could say it is like compressing the earth and the moon down to the size of a fist. Matter produces heat when compressed, so I suppose this would create temperatures in the range of ten to twenty thousand degrees. That should be enough to take care of even Imagine Breaker."

St. Germain had no grudge against the individual named Kamijou Touma.

In fact, he had no real interest in him.

From the very beginning, he had not been looking at either Aihana Etsu or Kamijou Touma.

"Are you watching, Magic Gods?"

He laughed.

He was neither a magician nor a Magic God. He alone formed an entirely new category.

And he seemed to be challenging someone.

"The sword once chose who would be king and I acquired Aihana Etsu with the shield, but you will acquire no one. Your precious toy will die here. So what will you do as Magic Gods? Is this any time to be mocking Aleister without a care in the world?"

At that moment, a soft chime sounded to say the elevator had arrived.

All of the St. Germains turned toward it.

When they saw the boy who stepped out, their expressions softened.

They looked to their small king holding the golden shield.

“Hi, my king. I was waiting for you.”

Aihana Etsu’s eyes looked somehow dark and sluggish.

He looked more like roughly worn down metal than a carefully sharpened blade.

With his expression still rough, the boy slowly opened his lips.

And he spoke.

“Where is this?”

“The final stage.”

The blonde St. Germain standing next to him took over.

“No matter what anyone says, that rescue-obsessed idiot will notice the change and come running. You need only wait here, king. Frenda’s legacy will invite in her enemy.”

“That simply?”

“That simplicity is what makes the world so baffling. It makes it all the more strange that he did not show up in time for Frenda Seivelun.”

“…”

Aihana Etsu took a deep breath while he listened.

Why had Kamijou Touma not arrived in time for Frenda Seivelun?

If possible, he wanted to ask that.

But he also needed to ask himself the same thing.

(Why didn’t I arrive in time?)

X X X X

Kinuhata Saiai confronted twenty St. Germains.

Altogether, her opponents could wield two thousand spears at once and they attacked unendingly from every direction around her.

That said, her expression was not grim.

Her Offense Armor surrounded her with a barrier of compressed nitrogen several centimeters thick. At full power, it provided enough defensive power to deflect a sniper bullet. Used offensively, she could lift up a car in one hand.

So even if she was receiving two thousand attacks at once, they could not break her Offense Armor as long as each individual one's destructive power was below a certain level.

She knew what she had to worry about.

(Receiving super damage at the same spot over and over again. Even if it's only a few centimeters, I need to super shift the spot being hit or they might break through.)

Because she could survive those attacks, she had quickly managed to learn how St. Germain attacked.

(I thought that ability to open holes in people's flesh was super dangerous, but…)

She focused on the spears deflected by her Offense Armor.

Before long, something came into view.

(Basically, thin hair-like points extend fifty to one hundred centimeters from what looks like the tip of the spears. And anything they super touch has a tunnel opened for the actual spear to pass through. That's all it is.)

A rumbling burst out.

Even against twenty St. Germains, she had no real reason to stay on the defensive. She could stop the spears, so she could also approach and hit them with her nitrogen fist.

Fortunately, she was able to knock out the people who had been transformed into St. Germain. If they had continued to get back up, she would have had to break their arms and legs or even kill them.

Also, another hand reached in to grab and crush the countless spears shooting toward Kinuhata like bullets.

That hand belonged to Mugino Shizuri.

She had a simple means of defense. Her mechanical eye would track the spears' movements and her weaponized prosthetic hand would swing up with superhuman speed. With a sound like a sewing machine, she grabbed and broke each and every approaching spear.

It was simple to describe, but it made for a threatening visual when done fast enough and often enough to form afterimages.

The sewing machine roared on and the crumbling spears seemed to form a solid wall in front of them.

"Tch. What a pain in the ass. Can't we cut down their numbers a little?"

"Watch your language. And don't forget that the people on the front lines here might be from the super 'innocent' side of things."

"But if they are…"

"Yeah, I'll admit there are some things that super don't add up about all this."

As a user of nitrogen, it quickly came to her what St. Germain used: the element of carbon. All they were actually doing was transforming the Dianoid's walls and floor into projectile-like spears and launching them.

That would be more than enough of a threat to a normal person, but it seemed lacking and too superficial.

If they truly could directly manipulate carbon, they should have had a much wider array of attack methods.

"Did they forget to train each individual unit because they saw them as super expendable?"

"Winning isn't their objective, but what are they buying time for? Damn, this pisses me off!!"

As the girls wore down their numbers, the downpour of attacks suddenly stopped.

The St. Germains were gone.

"We only took out about half of them, right?"

"Looks like the rest of them fell super back."

Bloody boys and girls were collapsed on the floor, but not due to anything Mugino or Kinuhata had done. If those girls had tried to harm them, they would have had a hard time not turning them into mincemeat.

The blood looked like it was coming from internal wounds more than from external ones.

"So did we only take out the defective ones? To hell with them. They know how to take advantage of us."

Mugino had mentioned the possibility of them buying time for something, so had they finished their preparations for whatever it was?

"Ah," said Takitsubo Rikou.

As her eyes had wandered aimlessly, they had spotted one of the decorative flat-screen monitors.

It displayed a diagram of the Dianoid.

There was a red dot at the very bottom level and specialized shorthand symbols provided some kind of additional information. A normal student would have had no idea what it meant, but Mugino and Kinuhata wrinkled their brows in annoyance when they saw the string of letters.

"What do you think?"

"A graviton-style base isolation structure? Seriously? If someone misused that, they could compress the entire planet to the size of a fist."

More importantly, it was obvious why someone would have purposefully let this information get out.

"Come and get me if you can, hm?"

"I super don't know if this is intended for us, but I can't think of any reason why we can't crash the party."

The bottom level of the Dianoid was taken up by the base isolation structure using a graviton-style artificial gravity control device. The floor resembled thick glass and it floated a few centimeters off the ground.

Aihana Etsu leaned his small back against one of the pillars placed evenly along the large flat surface.

No, it was someone who was only using that name.

A former king had vanished and been forgotten, but Anne's test remained as it had not been destroyed or lost in the legend. This boy was the one who had overcome that test.

The bearer of the golden shield spoke to the female St. Germain standing next to him.

"Weren't you disappointed when you learned the answer you had been searching so long for was a liar who had to fake his identity to not be turned away at the entrance?"

"Hah! Gaps and impurities cause a diamond to shine all the brighter. Do you really think I would be disappointed in the one and only answer after spreading constant deceit for thousands of years? This just means that the truth I spent so much time searching for truly does exist. How could that be a bad thing?"

"I'm not like you. You had real power, so don't you regret this?"

"If I had truly gone along with what the ostentatious nobles said, not even the contents of a treasure island would be enough and I see no meaning in going along with them. More importantly, if anyone wishes to speak, they can speak. That suits those people who use their own filter to only see the reality they wish to see, no matter how much evidence is piled up before them. Heh heh. But those are exactly the ones who beg for the art of immortality or time travel once they age and stand on the verge of death."

"…"

"More importantly, have you forgotten, my king of the shield? Your value – your positive gap – is something at the level of once every two thousand years. To hide it, you were sent to Academy City where your talent would never be used and your Curriculum was handled with placebos and the kind of acting you would find at a school play."

The user of the shield still did not understand.

St. Germain repeated again and again that he had been chosen by Anne's Shield and that the shield's power was his power.

Anne's Shield could shoot down everything. No matter who he raised it against, a tiny power was guaranteed to tear through them.

This symbol of defensive force could put holes in two million foreheads in an instant.

Aihana Etsu stared into the distance while dragging around the shield of unknown material.

He looked to the stairs, the ducts, the maintenance ladders, and the elevator.

There were several entrances to the lowest level.

As he imagined who would be arriving through them, negative emotions swirled inside him.

"I see there is no need to say it all. Your job is to target Kamijou Touma. That is your greatest desire and Frenda's final request. I will eliminate all unnecessary obstacles along the way, so you take the path of the king."

For just an instant, the familiar face of his friend appeared in the back of his mind.

He felt like she was saying something, but her voice no longer came to him.

He tried reading her lips but could not convert it into words.

He sealed it all away and faced forward.

He then slammed the bottom of the golden shield into the floor.

“Let’s begin.”

A girl in a pink track suit, Takitsubo Rikou, turned her back on the intense fighting and crouched down.

However, she was not trembling in fear after losing her will to fight.

She picked up a small object she had found running along the floor.

“What is this?”

“Whoa!? I was found…and caught!? Kh. Release me, human!!”

“?”

Takitsubo tilted her head with a fifteen centimeter doll(?) in her hands. It was wearing something like a Halloween costume cut down to the bare minimums and it may have been given gyroscopes and an autonomous control program because it moved around quite nimbly.

Meanwhile, Stephanie had left her destroyed Power Lifter and she looked back and forth at both the intense battle and Takitsubo. Time seemed to run at different speeds between those two fields.

“Oh, honestly! What is going on!? But since they’ve drawn the focus towards themselves, we need to go hide. We aren’t any help in a fight, so staying here only restricts their freedom.”

Several metallic sounds accompanied Stephanie’s voice.

Takitsubo turned toward the blonde woman while still holding the struggling doll(?).

“What are you doing?”

“Putting together a PDW. I’m dismantling some Power Lifter components and putting them back together here. Owning a completed gun is illegal, but only having the different parts is rumored to be more of a gray zone. Not that it’s actually that simple!”

Even though she called it a PDW, it did not actually fire bullets using gunpowder. It apparently used pressurized gas to fire mock bullets made of tungsten steel. However, it still had enough firepower to fill a flesh-and-blood body with holes when fired from within twenty or thirty meters.

(It seems wrong that a toy is more complex than an actual gun.)

Suddenly, the doll(?) that Takitsubo held made its move.

It bit her finger, slipped away when she flinched, and landed on the floor. It then ran down the corridor and around a corner.

The track suit girl began to pursue and Stephanie decided this was better than forcibly guiding the girl to cover.

But Takitsubo lost sight of the doll(?) after turning the corner.

Nothing was moving in the polished corridor that looked like it was made of wood.

"?"

She tilted her head with a blank look in her eyes.

The girl did not notice the small duct cover sitting open near the floor on the wall.

Fifteen centimeter Othinus did not even have to duck as she ran full speed through the unlit tunnel of the duct.

(Honestly, this is no time to be doing this.)

She still had not managed to meet up with Kamijou Touma after he drew multiple St. Germains away from her. And now the various flat-screen monitors hinted at a gravity bomb on the lowest level. Given the situation, it was safe to assume this was the work of St. Germain and not some newcomer. She did not know how the situation had taken this turn, but it was clearly meant to lure Kamijou in.

Which meant…

(I can find him on the lowest level. Still, that isn't enough. St. Germain is a special kind of magician and not a Magic God. He's a synchronized and parallelized crystal. As a parallel processing network that doesn't rely on brainwaves, he can expand into anyone else regardless of their individual genetic code. I need to contact that grimoire library and work to explain his magic. The properties of a 99.9% pure diamond are determined by the less than 0.1% of impurities. For him, that would be a controller or settings file. We need to find that.)

While rationally putting together a plan, she jumped into a pit inside the duct.

Climbing up or down was not easy with her small body, but giving into gravity and sliding down was not difficult at all.

Given the condition when they had parted, Index would be in the shopping area of the lower level.

(But the question is what floor of the lower level she's on. There are at least twenty floors there. I just hope she has enough sense to stay put and wait for us where we left her.)

But as Othinus slid down to the lower level, a giant form shot out from the side where the duct had intersected with another duct.

"O-ohhhhhhhh!?"

She cried out, but the beast showed no mercy.

After a deafening crash and a mewing roar, Othinus was carried out of the duct like a stolen fish.

She groaned and hung limply in the bright light.

“Y-you again? I can’t stand this. …D-do – cough – d-do cats have no reverence for gods?”

“Bad Sphinx!! If you chew her up, I’ll be mad at you!”

A white nun shouted from nearby, but the cat ignored Index and happily presented the “prize” at her feet.

“P-pant, pant… M-more importantly, we need to get to the Dianoid’s lowest level. Now that St. Germain is luring him in, Kamijou Touma is almost guaranteed to go there. His fist may be strong, but that will lead to death if we don’t understand his opponent. It would be best if we could determine how St. Germain’s non-brainwave thought network works. All I know is it’s based on a crystalline structure that grows by repeatedly synchronizing and parallelizing.”

Kamijou and Hamazura faced the intercom-like device on the wall of Frenda’s secret base.

The alert about the lowest level had been special information for the upper level apartments, but…

“I hope that was enough to inform the others.”

“It’ll get through to anyone who understands that strange alphabet abbreviation, so that’s at least Takitsubo and Mugino.”

“I have my doubts about Index, but Othinus should manage.”

“But,” muttered Hamazura from the Power Lifter. “The gravity bomb data was sent to all the upper level apartments, right? Shouldn’t that have caused a panic earlier than this?”

“These are almost all used as storehouses for the rich. There probably wasn’t a single actual ‘resident’ here.”

Kamijou took a step away from the flat-panel screen.

“We did what we could, so let’s get going.”

“But a gravity bomb is way too far outside my area of expertise! I wouldn’t even know where to begin!”

“No, Aihana Etsu is our top priority. That hasn’t changed.”

“Wait a second.”

Hamazura frowned and asked the question on his mind.

“The Dianoid’s foundation floats a few centimeters off the ground for base isolation, right? And those St. Germain people have taken control of the artificial gravity control device that makes it possible. Can’t that crush the earth to the size of a fist if it goes out of control!? Then it’s obvious what they’re really after here! Aihana Etsu was just a decoy!!”

“Are you sure?” asked Kamijou. “He made for a lousy one if that was the intent. If it wasn’t for him, we would never have visited this room. Without him, there’s no way we would’ve seen the security alert sent to the high-class apartments. That’s completely backwards. If the black hole bomb or white dwarf bomb or whatever was St. Germain’s real goal, he never would have left this alert here for us to see. *And he would have made sure we never came into contact with Aihana.*”

“Wait, wait, wait.”

Hamazura cut off Kamijou and gently spread his steel hands, as if creating a wall with his gesture.

"That doesn't add up. If he was really after Aihana, St. Germain still would never have let us in here. If all he wanted to do was convince Aihana to act, it would've been best to keep Frenda's secret a mystery and *use the suspicion to fill Aihana with desire for revenge.* Since St. Germain didn't stop us from seeing this, it means he isn't after Aihana or the bomb."

"That's right." Unbelievably, Kamijou immediately agreed. "It's finally coming together. St. Germain's objective isn't Aihana Etsu or the gravity bomb. *He's looking at something else entirely.*"

"…What?"

"Thinking back, his very first attack was strange. He was after Aihana? He was after the shield? That's why he stopped attacking me and focused on those things? Yeah, right. If he could have killed me at any time, he could have just finished me off and then focused on Aihana. But he didn't. There was something else there that forced him to leave. Then again, *I bet even that's only a side issue for him.*"

"There's still more!? Like what!?"

"You don't want to know." Kamijou moved the conversation along. "At any rate, we need to stop St. Germain as soon as possible! And for that, we have to start with Aihana Etsu. From the outside, it's impossible to tell if St. Germain has a leader or a hierarchy, but based on what's happened, he's been concentrating himself around Aihana. If we're going to find out more about St. Germain, the unit closest to Aihana would be best!!"

Hamazura tried to think through it all, but his understanding was reaching its saturation point.

Regardless, Kamijou did not stop.

That may have had something to do with how often he had dealt with magic in the past.

"Listen, the St. Germains have shown no sign of communicating by phone or radio. We've seen dozens, but there may be over a hundred in the building and their minds are all linked. My guess is they're using some kind of telepathy magic. I don't know if it's complex enough to create one large will, but if so, this system is even more convenient than the Misaka Network since it isn't bound by brainwaves!!"

"Wait, wait, wait!! I know you've seen a lot, but please keep it at a level I can understand!!"

"It means it doesn't matter what St. Germain we attack!" shouted back Kamijou. "They're all the center and they're all the terminals. It sounds like an infinitely reproducing system with an endless supply of replacements, but it probably isn't. You could say they're all computers. No matter where a virus enters the network, all of the computers will be infected! We can't let ourselves be distracted by their numbers. *We have to focus as much as we can on just one of them*!!"

"A virus? Can you be more specific!?"

"I may sound like I know what I'm talking about, but I'm an amateur too," admitted Kamijou without letting it bother him.

He no longer insisted on fighting alone. He would use everything available to him.

That was the path he chose.

"But I know a nun who knows a ton about interfering with magicians like this. If we add some knowledge on Magic Gods into the mix, it'll be perfect. …Yes. That's right. Original grimoires infect people's brains. She

has 103,000 grimoires in her head, so she might be able put together a specialized method of dealing with that kind of thing!!"

"You're not making any sense again. But anyway, Aihana Etsu and St. Germain are waiting on the lowest level, right? That's all I need to know right now!"

"Right." Kamijou slowly breathed out and spoke. "I'll do something about Aihana Etsu. And once I do, the St. Germains are sure to focus on me. I said to grab Aihana with that Power Lifter when he comes back to his senses, but scratch that. I'll take care of that too, so you deal with the gravity bomb instead. You're good with machines, right? Unfortunately, I'm a complete amateur with that. If I had that job, I'd definitely get us all blown up."

"Are you still saying that? There's no point in going along with Aihana Etsu's revenge."

"Unfortunately, we don't have time to explain everything to him. But no matter the situation, we can't just let him die. And is this any time to be worrying about me? You're going to have to prepare yourself for the worst too."

"…"

"Hamazura?"

"…Sorry."

At first, Kamijou did not know why Hamazura was apologizing.

But a moment later, the Power Lifter's giant palm approached and shoved the boy backwards.

"Gah!!"

Kamijou's back struck the tatatami mats and knocked the breath out of him, but he soon realized he had more to worry about.

Hamazura had already stepped outside of the large living room.

The room's sliding screen forcefully shut, but it was not a normal one made of Japanese paper and a wooden frame. Its cutting-edge carbon materials could easily stop a handgun bullet.

"What the hell are you doing, Hamazura!?"

He quickly got up and grabbed the screen, but it would not budge. It seemed to have been jammed shut in some way. He rethought his strategy and kicked it with the bottom of his foot, but it was no use.

He heard a muffled voice on the other side.

"Aihana Etsu's revenge just doesn't make sense. I don't care if it's part of your strategy; it's wrong for you to be attacked for that."

"What!? Don't you know this isn't the time for this!?"

"But it is," said Hamazura. "Ha ha. Oh, I get it. I guess you wouldn't know since you weren't there then."

"?"

"Do you know the name of the guy who *was* there when Frenda Seivelun died?"

"…"

It couldn't be.

A very bad feeling entered the back of Kamijou Touma's mind.

Hamazura Shiage gave the answer regardless.

"It was me. Frenda died because I didn't get there in time."

"Dammit," spat out Kamijou.

His own plan was wrapping the noose around someone else's neck.

He finally grasped the situation.

"So if we're going to divide up the work here, it makes more sense for me to deal with Aihana Etsu's revenge."

"Wait, Hamazura…"

"I'll draw the attention of Aihana and St. Germain, so you do something about the gravity bomb. If you can't do it yourself, just get help from someone who knows about that kind of thing. Make sure you do something about it, okay?"

"Wait!! I didn't put together that plan to have you do this!!"

"Hah."

The voice beyond the screen grew quieter.

No, more distant.

"Then this is *a good chance for you to see how it feels for the one being protected.*"

That was all.

The sound completely vanished.

Hamazura Shiage had taken the Power Lifter out of the high-class apartment. He was on his way to Aihana Etsu who had a magic shield and the countless St. Germains who served him.

"Goddammit!!"

Left alone, Kamijou yelled and kicked the carbon screen a few more times, but it showed no sign of breaking.

He then searched around the room again.

"Wait."

His eyes stopped on one point.

What he saw would not help him escape the room, but he hesitantly reached for the object placed within a pile of birthday presents.

He may have made a fundamental misunderstanding.

There may have been a way to settle things with Aihana Etsu without sitting there and taking the boy's punches.

And if so…

"I can't let you do this."

Kamijou made his way to the kitchen connected to the living room and his eyes stopped on the kind of cart used to carry food in large mansions. He placed a few heavy items on it and tied them on with power cables to increase the cart's weight.

"Letting Aihana die is out of the question, but it's meaningless if you die instead, Hamazura!"

He returned to the living room.

He set his aim on the carbon screen, took a ten step running start and crashed the cart into the screen.

The screen was knocked backwards as if by a battering ram.

He continued out of the room and into the long hallway.

Hamazura was already nowhere to be seen.

He quickly ran to the elevator hall. As before, just one of the elevator doors was broken.

Aihana Etsu and St. Germain were on the lowest level. They were all the way at the bottom. Unless he had a very strange way of thinking, Hamazura would have gone straight down there with the Power Lifter.

Kamijou peered into the abyss.

He could not see the bottom of the dark elevator shaft, so it looked like a gaping maw.

Even with steel arms, there was no guaranteeing one's survival.

Doing it with flesh-and-blood limbs was even worse, so…

(This is going to be risky.)

Kamijou gulped and quickly removed his jacket. He wrapped it around his hand like when training a police dog and grabbed the wire that was slippery with machine oil.

He ignored his animal instincts and jumped out into the elevator shaft.

Mugino Shizuri's Meltdowner beam burned away the door from the stairs.

The #4 girl then spoke to Takitsubo and Kinuhata.

"The hell is that? Is that *donut* near the ceiling the gravity device?"

"If Frenda secretly messed with it, it could easily be a gravity bomb. What do you super think?"

“Nothing would surprise me with her. She was the type to wash the blood from her hands and head right into a fancy shop with a smile on her face. Talking about good and evil is pointless with her.”

Takitsubo Rikou asked a question while her gaze wandered.

“What should we do?”

“It’s that obvious?” readily replied Mugino. “Let’s deal with this and get back home.”

Guided by fifteen centimeter Othinus, Index held the calico cat and crawled through a narrow duct.

The two girls opened the duct cover and looked to the many St. Germains and the boy at the center.

Specifically, they looked to the golden shield in his small hands.

“Hey, can you tell what that is?”

“Queen Anne’s Shield. A legend to match the one of acquiring the sword.”

“But it isn’t supposed to exist. That king didn’t have a twin sister.”

To begin with, the legend of the sword had been created when a man who was both a knight and an author gathered various stories of knights scattered across Western Europe and arranged them into a single story. That created a fair number of discrepancies in the same legend and some information had been shoved aside in the process of arranging it all into the one story.

Queen Anne’s existence was nothing more than one of those neglected pieces of information.

There was no evidence of someone like that existing.

In fact, if one investigated the driving force behind the telling of the story, it was nothing more than what would be the most exciting. During the legend of the king, he was said to have let go of Excalibur and used a different sword instead, but Queen Anne’s existence was even stranger than that. Searching through the old texts and parting the underbrush would show that her name does appear, but some researchers said her name was “An” instead of “Anne”. And in Old English, “an” was used in place of “if”, so it was even said to be an allusion or joking reference to “the story of that which does not exist” which had been taken seriously when the stories were compiled and then transformed into an actual name.

A counterpart to the sword had now appeared as possible proof of her existence, but Index gave a calm answer.

“I think this is a ‘logical reversal’.”

There were some things that anyone could picture in their minds and that they would recognize if someone showed it to them, yet a careful examination would show that there was no clear legend or myth behind it.

For example, a continent that sank to the bottom of the Atlantic.

For example, a magical sword that was used against the shogunate.

For example, the red thread connecting the pinkies of lovers.

I read it in that book. I heard it from that person. There were apparent sources, but a more thorough inspection would run into a dead end. Perhaps they had no objective proof in the form of records because it was spread orally, perhaps there had been records on stone slates or frescos that were lost as time passed, and perhaps the author's personal opinions had slipped in during the process of compiling the records.

And as the legends spread from person to person, gaining credibility as it did so, they would create something with a rich history and yet which never actually existed.

They would grow into something like heaven or hell that no one had ever seen and yet everyone had a common image of.

One of those logical reversals was Queen Anne's Shield.

Index and Othinus had never seen it since it was a nonexistent legend, but they were able to decide this was it at a glance.

"It's easy to give a physical history to something with a great presence. You just have to create the evidence yourself. It's just like drawing a new treasure map on top of ancient parchment to gain sponsors to dig for buried treasure."

"So the shield was made by St. Germain? That does sound like something a liar would do."

"But even if it's a fake, magic is still magic. If an Academy City esper uses that…"

"The side effects will tear his body to pieces. If that's part of St. Germain's plan against Kamijou Touma, it's obvious what he wants. He's trying to rip apart Kamijou Touma's heart using the death of a failed opponent."

Aihana Etsu slowly narrowed his eyes and dragged the golden shield.

In his memories, "someone" was smiling.

Even after his friend's death, he had relied on her words to make it this far, but he could no longer see the details.

Bit by bit, the vision in his head was destroyed like a photo in the flames.

The knowledge of Frenda Seivelun's death had likely done more than confirm her death.

In that instant, Aihana Etsu's heart had died as well.

With only his physical body left, he no longer trembled in pain or fear.

He did not care if he was going to die here.

If he did survive, he would continue fighting until he finally died.

The elevator door was loudly broken down by a great force.

The person who stepped out was not Kamijou Touma. It was someone Aihana Etsu had never expected. In fact, he did not even know who it was. He had technically seen the boy in the Dianoid's parking garage, but he had already forgotten that.

And so he let out a low voice.

“You aren’t the one I called for.”

“Even if I’m the one who let Frenda Seivelun die?”

“…”

A creaking sound came from the golden shield’s handle as he squeezed it.

Hamazura remained aboard the Power Lifter and he slammed its steel fists together.

“I know the general situation, but it makes no sense for you to attack Kamijou Touma. If you want to take revenge for Frenda, there’s someone a lot more suitable.”

“Who were you to her?”

“Item,” concisely answered Hamazura. “It was a very small framework. I may have only been the underling there, but I was still a part of Item. It was my job to support her, so it’s my job to stop anyone from dying in her name.”

Instead of Aihana Etsu, it was the St. Germains who reacted.

But before the countless Chambord spears could show themselves, Aihana Etsu spoke.

“You don’t have to, St. Germain.”

“But, my king.”

“This is my job. If what he’s saying is true, then it matters that I do the fighting.”

The corners of Hamazura’s mouth relaxed a bit when he heard that.

Aihana Etsu and Kamijou Touma would not clash. The scenario St. Germain wanted would not come to pass and it was obvious St. Germain was panicking a little.

(But this might not satisfy him. Just like serving ramen to someone craving gyudon, he might still feel hungry afterwards.)

He remembered the time just after the charismatic Skill Out leader Komaba Ritoku had died. To protect themselves, they had taken on some dirtier jobs and tried to kill an innocent adult.

He had not used any of his imagination and simply swung around murderous tools like some kind of monkey.

(But this will teach you how bad violence feels. You’ll learn that tingling in your fingertips after you stab someone or split their head open. You can only wield that weapon so innocently because you don’t know how disgusting a thing it is. So I’ll teach you that.)

There were people who grew bolder when they held a deadly weapon. Some would grow intoxicated on the destructive power and destroy themselves.

But Hamazura doubted Aihana Etsu was that kind of person.

He gave the reason in his heart.

(When you learned of Frenda Seivelun's death, you learned just how unreasonable death is.)

Aihana Etsu would apparently be injured all over if he used the shield, but Hamazura was not going to look after him that much. They were both risking death here and Hamazura Shiage was not as benevolent as Kamijou Touma.

So…

"C'mon then." He raised the Power Lifter's arms in a martial arts stance. "I'm sick of people like Silver Cross and Kuroyoru digging back up this same crap over and over again! When someone tried to take revenge on you in the Edo period, it was apparently not considered a crime if you killed them. You have one chance. That's as much as I'm willing to give you!! So let's do this, Aihana Etsu!!"

"Fine then."

Just once, Aihana Etsu struck the transparent floor with the bottom of the golden shield.

"Then I'll kill you first. Afterwards, I'll kill Kamijou Touma too. And once all of the insane filters have been removed, I'll search out and kill all of the perpetrators and criminals. I'll do what that girl can't anymore."

Aihana Etsu felt something stabbing into his own heart with each word he spoke. Each time, the crumbling remains of his memories would break away a little more.

Revenge was not an act of harming your opponent.

He belatedly realized it was an act of dirtying your own hands, showing contempt for yourself, and killing yourself.

But even as he realized that, he could no longer stop.

After all, what else was he supposed to do?

The friend he had been searching for was long dead, there was no way of saving her, and the crybaby's convenient dream of never giving up on his precious friend had been smashed into a million pieces.

So what was he supposed to do?

His dream was gone, his hope was destroyed, and his ideals were lost.

Should he curl up and give up like a crybaby once more? Should he shout that there was nothing he could do and decide the realistic, efficient, and logical thing to do was to not lift a finger and to hit the reset button? Should he throw Frenda Seivelun's existence into the trash and continue on towards tomorrow?

No.

He could not bear to do that.

He did not want to abandon his friend. He did not care if he was being stubborn or patronizing. He wanted to continue trying to do something for her. It did not matter if this was not realistic, efficient, or logical. He did not want to throw her into the trash and he did not want to forget her and move on.

So kill your heart.

Scrape off all the excess fat and leave only the bones.

Become a machine made to take revenge.

“I’ll start with you,” he said with the golden shield at the ready.

He felt his body temperature gradually lowering as he continued speaking.

“You can tell me what you had to do with her death while I crush you.”

Their gazes met.

It no longer mattered that this was not Kamijou Touma or Mugino Shizuri.

He had not overcome his shortcomings.

In the end, he was still Aihana Etsu. He was still a pathetic person who could not stand tall without relying on a fake ID.

This was just the opposite extreme.

He had taken on too many negative feelings and his emotions had numbed over.

And he did not care if that was the case.

He only cared about fighting back.

Activating the shield and killing Hamazura Shiage would be worth 100 points. But even if the shield refused to activate, he could still knock him down with his own hands and choke the life out of him. What did it matter if his own arm was broken or eyes were crushed in the process? In the worst case, he would not be able to do anything and only add to the pile of corpses. As long as he could avoid that, nothing else mattered.

Revenge was an act of tearing at your own flesh, not your enemy’s.

It was an act of killing yourself through your enemy.

(Yes.)

Aihana Etsu felt like he was gradually seeing the truth of his own being.

(I guess nothing St. Germain said really mattered. It doesn’t matter if this shield is real or if I’m special.)

He could feel his scattered thoughts gathering on a single point.

They were turning toward a clear goal that was also a dead-end.

(Maybe I just couldn’t bear to live in a world without my friend.)

So he had wanted to leave.

He had wanted to vanish to some other place like cutting the string to a balloon.

(But I’ll leave my mark somehow or other.)

He tore through the wind with his shoulder, walked on his own two feet, and directly approached Hamazura Shiage.

He intentionally moved within range of the Power Lifter.

(I have to do at least one thing for her!! I have to do at least one thing she wanted!! And I'll carve the proof into this guy's body!!)

This was the preliminary battle. And it was also the lighting of a fuse that could not be stopped once it began.

His eyes coldly reflected the light like glass and he prepared to pull that final trigger.

But something happened just before he did.

Kamijou Touma climbed through the elevator shaft's broken door and approached one of the lowest level's evenly spaced pillars.

Aihana Etsu stood in front of Hamazura Shiage's Power Lifter, he held a huge golden shield, and many St. Germains waited behind him.

Was there no stopping him now?

Was there no way of stopping his desire for revenge without bloodshed?

(No.)

Kamijou reached a silent conclusion.

(He'll stop. If he's truly doing this for his friend, he'll stop.)

Kamijou held a single trump card in his hand.

If Aihana Etsu came back to his senses, it would bring an end to St. Germain's puppet show. The St. Germains would certainly try to dispose of the boy once their plan fell apart and Kamijou doubted he could endure their attacks from all directions with only Imagine Breaker.

(So I need you.)

Kamijou stared at Hamazura's back from behind the pillar.

(Don't die yet. I need you so we can all return from this with smiles on our faces!!)

While checking on the focus of their gazes, he moved from pillar to pillar.

Little by little, he approached the center of the disturbance. There were more than fifty St. Germains here, but they only had their human senses at their disposal. They did not have eyes on the backs of their heads and they could not scan the entire area with microwaves or ultrasonic waves.

All of the St. Germains were watching Aihana Etsu's movements, so they would not spot Kamijou as long as he did not draw any attention to himself.

(I know someone who truly gave himself over to revenge, Aihana Etsu.)

He had met that person in snowy Baggage City. He had gone by two names: Kihara Kagun and Bersi. He had swallowed up both enemy and ally and he had left this earth after perfectly carrying out his revenge.

If someone had asked him if he had been happy with the result, he would have definitely said he was satisfied.

But Kamijou would have given a different answer if asked if he approved of what had happened.

It did not matter if that had been the most correct decision in the world.

It did not matter if everyone involved had accepted it or if digging it back up now was unnecessary.

Despite all that, he knew he could not walk that same path.

If he saw someone falling in that direction, he would not push them on their way. He would grab their hand.

(I won't let you end up like that.)

He snuck within a few meters of the surrounding St. Germains and thought quietly.

He had a reason to make this approach despite the risk to himself.

(A desire for revenge is best removed before it has a chance to settle in. It's most frightening when it surpasses emotions and becomes normal. After it shifts to a quieter burn, *they can never relax* without that desire.)

He checked what he held in his hand.

It may have had no meaning to the other six or seven billion people, but it was probably the final key to this situation.

(So I won't let you end up like that.)

He clenched his teeth and continued along a path that bordered death.

(I won't let you use revenge as an excuse. You don't have to want my help and I know this is just me being selfish, but I still won't let you degrade what you care about most by using it as a blood-soaked indulgence!! So remember, Aihana Etsu. Remember the very first feelings you held in your heart before ever using that name!!)

And then Kamijou Touma took the final action.

Something slid along the floor.

The surrounding St. Germains noticed, but Aihana Etsu held out his hand and stopped them before the sharp Chambords could tear it to pieces.

The boy had seen it.

It could not have cost more than three thousand yen, but to him, it was something he could not overlook even if he had to weigh it against the entire blue planet.

It was a ten centimeter box wrapped in pale green paper and red ribbon.

The ribbon crossed on the top to hold a card in place. It must have had a cheap electronic music player inside because it played a dull birthday melody.

It was probably part of a message service.

And the voice of the sender accompanied the melody.

It was a certain girl's voice.

"Happy birthday to you!! Hey, hey, hey. In the end, it's a surprise present for you, Kanou-chan!!"

"…"

Aihana Etsu…no, the boy who had only been using that name felt something in the back of his mind.

The unrecognizable remnants of something like a burnt photo were restored all at once.

There may have been no real meaning in it.

It did not change the fact that the girl was already dead, it overturned none of his assumptions, and immersing himself in old memories may have been no different from writhing in bed with an imaginary partner.

But…

"Nee hee hee. You're the type who forgets his own birthday, aren't you? But! Don't underestimate Miss Frenda's communication skills! I researched what you wanted long ago! Now, now. Open the box and tremble at how scarily on target I was. Gah hah hah!!"

Aihana Etsu had decided revenge was an act of scraping away the excess fat from yourself rather than an act of harming your enemy.

That "excess fat" would become a weight that trapped more and more people in the desire for revenge.

The boy seemed to be dragged back to being human instead of a revenge-taking machine.

He stopped.

He sank.

He drowned.

A warmth he thought he had already lost forced the gears in his mind to reverse. The gears were destroyed one by one and it all fell apart.

A memory returned to him.

He recalled someone from a time before he had used the name of Academy City's #6.

"In the end, you insult yourself and call yourself a crybaby, but it's not going to end that way. I'm not some kind of benevolent person, you know? I'm not trying to get along with all six billion people out there. You're one of the friends I, the great Frenda, chose and approved of! I think that's something you can be proud of!!"

Time stopped.

Aihana Etsu stopped moving.

Something was directly driven into the small boy's heart.

This was not like St. Germain who spoke about the world while pretending he knew what he was talking about.

This was the real thing.

These were the words of the friend he had pursued for so long.

"Your tears are like a safety lock from your common sense. They'll make sure you don't stray from the proper path no matter how unreasonable the obstacle. That's something I don't have, so I respect you for having something I could never reach! There are so, so, *so* many people that will end up doing awful things so easily, but your strength will never allow that. So be proud. In the end, you can be proud of having *the strength to cry and forgive anything*!!"

"Oh…"

A heavy sound shook the room as the golden shield slipped from the boy's hands and fell to the floor.

He no longer needed Anne's Shield.

He did not need to rely on a legend to stand on his own two feet.

He used his freed hands to cover his face.

"I remember now, St. Germain."

He was not one of the Academy City's Level 5s.

He was not someone who created a great legend just like the person who had once been chosen by a sword.

But what did that matter?

This boy had had been born into this world as his own person. He could not pretend to be anyone else and he was an irreplaceable gear to this world, no matter how small and insignificant it might be. Someone had smiled his way and celebrated him. In so doing, she had proven his existence.

This was a single trait.

It was not some cheap way out. Unlike the first prize earned by following a legend or some other path someone had created to the mountaintop, he had to pave the way forward on his own. Mastering a trait of one's own was a much more difficult and challenging task than reaching some ready-made peak.

"I remember my name, St. Germain. My name is Kanou Shinka."

Even so, the devil on his shoulder continued to whisper in his ear.

But he did not care if he was called pathetic, pitiful, unsightly, or embarrassing.

He would part ways with the easily followed path and make his own way out in to the world.

He would not use St. Germain's temptation as an excuse. He would not use Frenda Seivelun's death as an indulgence. He would not rely on the reputation of the mysterious #6 or nonexistent Queen Anne.

He would stand with his own strength.

He would use his own mind to remember what it was he had truly wanted to do.

At the very least, that had not been to fabricate feelings for his silenced friend and throw fresh fuel on the fire of selfish revenge.

Frenda Seivelun had kept “something” hidden and she would not have wanted to invite this boy onto that bloody path from which one could never return. She may have put on an act in the hopes that he would remain in the realm of the sun and she may have thought of him as someone strong enough to cry and forgive anything.

If so, what path should he take?

What should he do as a resident of that sunny realm?

“So St. Germain, I can see my true enemy now. This wasn’t for anyone else or because of anyone else. It was me!! I was the one that used her death and trampled her underfoot! I used her as a tool of killing!! And I won’t accept you!!”

St. Germain reacted swiftly.

With an explosive sound, Chambords forcefully skewered the birthday present from below.

The wrapping and ribbons were torn and the box itself was ripped to shreds.

But the boy’s expression remained unchanged and he raised his small hand.

A cheap pocket watch fell into it.

He wrapped his hand around the silver device and grabbed the fluttering card between his index and middle fingers.

Happy birthday, Kanou Shinka.

A girl who was no longer among the living had given him this celebration of life and acknowledgment of his existence. He held that proof up like a blade as he spoke.

“You’re welcome, Frenda.”

He shed his old skin and shattered the mask of “Aihana Etsu”.

The boy became a man.

He was Kanou Shinka and no one else.

He would not waste this celebrated life and name. To struggle against the world, he faced his true enemy.

In that moment, Kamijou Touma smiled while still crouching.

In that moment, Hamazura Shiage sighed from his Power Lifter.

The two of them were thinking the same thing.

“Guess I’ve got no choice.”

“Guess I’ve got no choice.”

They were not old friends.

They were just one of the six billion that filled the earth.

But they knew one thing: It would be a great shame if Aihana Etsu died.

And he was no longer Aihana Etsu. He was a man who had overcome his bonds and now used the name Kanou Shinka.

So…

He had found value in stepping into that deadly place, so he did not hesitate to rush into the crowd of St. Germains.

That was when something happened.

It was just as St. Germain began to use his countless Chambord spears to dispose of Kanou Shinka now that the puppet show was over.

Kamijou and Hamazura cut in and used Imagine Breaker and the Power Lifter’s arms to break through the downpour of spears. Kamijou grabbed Kanou Shinka through a slight gap, pulled him in, and then pushed him forward.

A moment later, a brilliant beam of light surged in.

It was the #4’s Meltdowner.

But once he noticed it was targeting something other than the Chambords, Hamazura’s eyes opened wide.

“Dammit, Mugino!! Why are you trying to kill Kanou!?”

“Eh? But his determination and change of heart has nothing to do with me. He looked like he was on the enemy’s side, so I can’t see any reason to go easy on him.”

“This has lots to do with you!! This has more to do with you than anyone else!! I may not be one to talk, but you’re the one that caused all this mess in the first plaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaace!!”

He shouted at the top of his lungs, but Mugino only sighed.

As someone who worked underground jobs, she dryly cut through it all. If she could not tell if someone was an enemy or an ally and if they registered as yellow instead of a clear green or red, she would incapacitate them. It could be a reading beyond a wall, a hypnotized innocent, or someone convinced by a third party to take revenge. If they were not a clear ally, a certain type of professional would view them as a target for destruction.

“So.”

Mugino Shizuri produced a new ball of light from thin air and faced St. Germain.

“You’re still as red as can be though, aren’t you, you piece of shit?”

There was movement elsewhere as well.

“Touma!!”

“Oh, honestly. Does everyone have to head out into the open!?”

It was Index, the nun in a white habit with gold embroidery, and Stephanie, the woman with short blonde hair who was acting as the nun’s bodyguard with a PDW.

Index also had fifteen centimeter Othinus on her shoulder and Takitsubo Rikou, the girl in a pink track suit, stood behind Stephanie.

Kamijou Touma said nothing and Hamazura Shiage did not cut in.

Everything the boy needed to do came from his own heart, so they left it up to him.

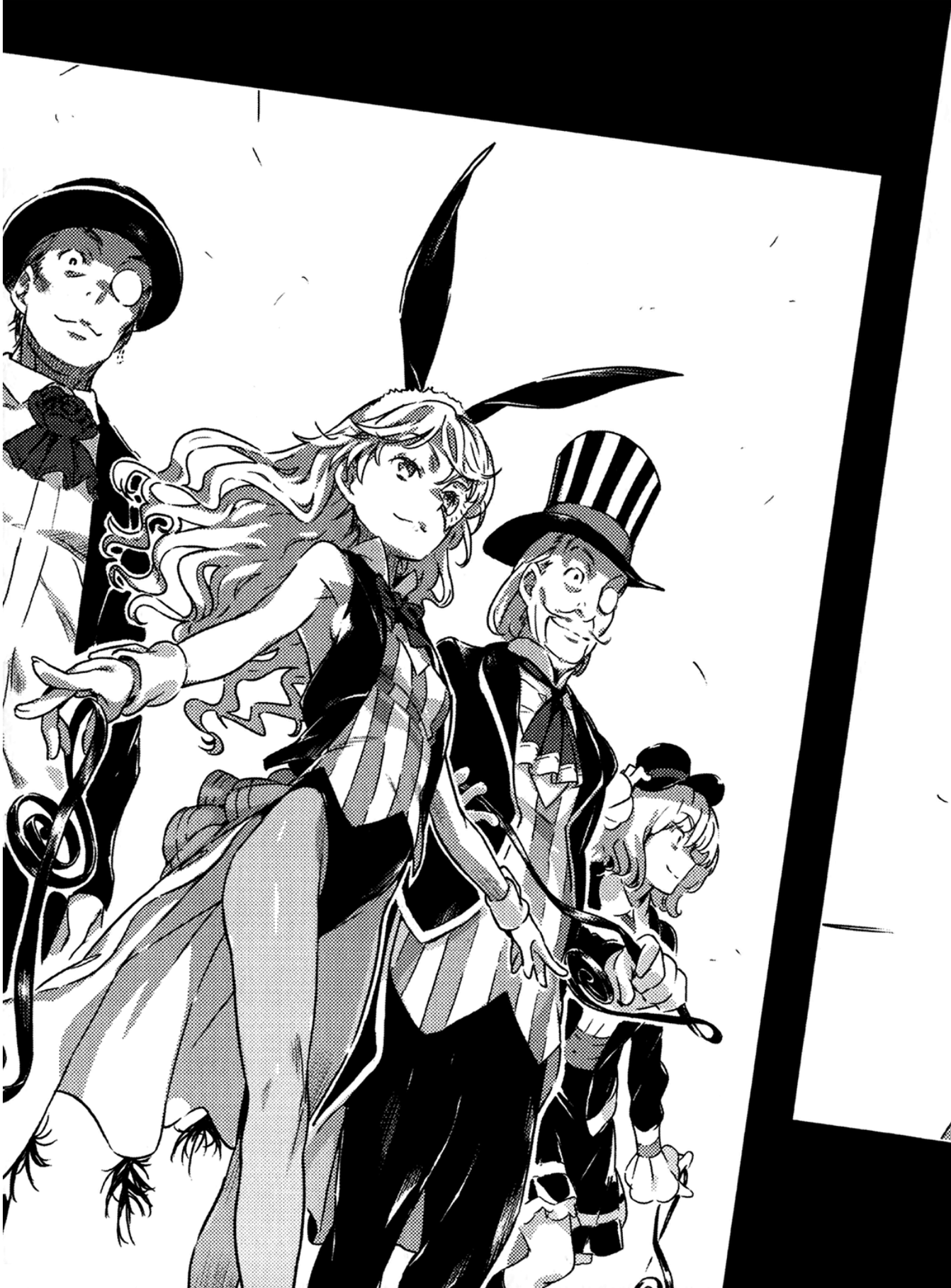
Kanou Shinka stood up once more and made an announcement while flanked by the two heroes.

“I’m taking it back, St. Germain.”

He faced a monster whose very existence had become a sort of legend.

He opposed it as a single being and a single hero.

“I’ll be taking back every last piece of my friend’s pride that you trampled underfoot!!”



Between the Lines 3

That golden retriever had an armory in each of the twenty-three districts.

Kihara Noukan walked to District 23.

He arrived at an aircraft maintenance bay far larger than a school gym. The entrance looked more like a moving wall than a door as it slowly opened to the left and right. The lights inside came on automatically.

It was filled with several ejection containers and large trucks to tow them.

This was a walk-in closet to Noukan. He could choose the appropriate clothes for the occasion and head out to the dinner party with the optimum outfit. And he would use bullets instead of manners, shells instead of etiquette, laser beams instead of affection, liquid nitrogen instead of hospitality, and killer microwaves instead of respect.

The golden retriever's goal was to destroy an irregular element inside an otherwise stable world that followed the laws of physics.

Namely, magic.

And his greatest hypothetical enemy was…

"So the Magic Gods have made their move."

That said, he had no real grudge against magicians or the Magic Gods that were their ultimate form. Nor did he have any kind of heroic story in which they had taken something precious from him.

But he knew the people who had transformed him from a normal dog into what he was now. They were the ones who could be called the original Kiharas.

Not even one hundred years had passed since the category of Kiharas had taken clear form. A similar concept had likely been spread around like the roots of grass, but only recently had it been gathered together to form the Kiharas.

Even the creation of Academy City was the work of that "human" when he had used the confusion of reconstruction after an old war to arrive here, so it was not hard to imagine the concept of the Kiharas had also been created quite recently.

The original seven had been mere humans who both laughed and cried like normal people.

It had not been known what a Kihara was at the time and that had caused more suffering for them than anyone else. Even as they despaired at how completely insane and mad they had become, they had been unable to stop themselves from continuing down the path of science. That was the type of people they had been.

The one who had provided the golden retriever with his intelligence had always patted the dog's head while apologizing in human language.

As normal people, their reason had caused them to suffer, but as researchers, the reports of successful experiments had brought them joy. Their faces had always contained a complex mixture of emotions.

“If everything in the world can be explained with scientific formulae, then the world will contain nothing but resignation and despair. Doing that would be much like summoning Laplace’s theoretical demon.”

That was true, but had the hand rubbing his head contained a softness not found in a completed Kihara?

“But at the same time, it will mean the arrival of a kind world in which the unreasonable side of the world will eternally lose all opportunity to kill people. Now, which view is correct?”

Those original members were gone now.

They had used themselves to define what a Kihara was, summed it up in a way that anyone could understand, and then left the world behind. Even as they grew madder by the day, they had constantly fought the unreasonable side of the world using human intellect. That had led to the completed Kiharas of today.

That was why Kihara Noukan had no particular grudge against the magic side.

That was why the golden retriever had no interest in the solid yet kind world that the original members had hoped for.

“Don’t worry.”

Scientific knowledge may not have been able to prove the existence of heaven.

The laws of physics may not have been able to measure the weight of the soul.

But the large dog still spoke.

“Even if you have left this world, the Kiharas you left behind are still here.”

The golden retriever gave an instruction in his head and the countless trucks loaded with ejection containers all gave the initial roars of ignition. A storm of headlights filled the entire scene.

A mass of metal sat there.

The collection of armor known as the Anti-Art Attachment followed Kihara Noukan’s movements as he turned around.

He stared into the infinite darkness outside and carried countless lights with him as he spoke in his heart.

Focus on nothing but being a Kihara.

With that wish, he began to work for the people who had transformed a dog into a true being with a heart of his own.

Chapter 4: A Single Breakthrough — Hand_Made_ROUTE.

The transparent floor floated a few centimeters off the ground.

A giant donut-shaped machine was located above the evenly spaced pillars.

It was a graviton-style artificial gravity control device.

Now that it had been tampered with, gravity bomb may have been a more apt name.

It covered everything like an oppressive starry sky.

"…"

The group of St. Germains parted like the Red Sea as they changed formation.

One individual had long, wavy blonde hair and white skin. She had likely been intentionally made to resemble Frenda Seivelun to use against Kanou Shinka. Her tailcoat resembled a stage magician's bunny suit and jacket combination.

That woman stood at the center of it all, and the excitement spread through them all like heat through a diamond.

She pulled a twisted spear from the ground and held it in one hand.

"Do you really think you can defeat a sturdy crystal structure with nothing but a few different individuals?"

The blonde St. Germain smiled as she spoke.

"You seem to be mistaken about something. I am not a magician or a Magic God. I am a third category to go alongside those two. If you wish to completely destroy me, you need the same level of firepower necessary to extinguish the entire category of 'magician' or 'Magic God'. By gathering together, you have merely saved me the trouble of hunting you all down."

"Enough talk," spat out Kanou Shinka.

He shook his semi-long hair while speaking on an equal level as the monster.

"Come and get us, if you can. Or do you refuse to fight unless someone throws a glove at you?"

"…"

St. Germain remained silent for a moment, but her smile remained and she eventually sighed.

Almost immediately afterwards, more than five thousand Chambords rushed in at frightening speed from all 360 degrees around him.

There may have been nothing he could have done on his own.

He might have been overwhelmed by the numbers and had every inch of his body skewered.

But Kamijou Touma used Imagine Breaker, Hamazura Shiage used his Power Lifter, Mugino Shizuri used Meltdowner, and Kinuhata Saiai used Offense Armor.

It sounded less like shattering glass and more like a pillar of jewels breaking.

Even with hundreds or thousands of simultaneous attacks, there was nothing to worry about when St. Germain had a single target: Kanou Shinka. If they all surrounded the boy and prepared to intercept, they could reach the spears that were concentrated together and destroy them.

With someone to the front, back, left, and right, they could protect his life.

All four of them only needed some kind of nonstandard power.

"What's wrong, St. Germain?" asked Kamijou. "I'm sick of seeing what you can do. It's a powerful but repetitive threat, so can we bring this to an end now?"

"This is a real pain," cut in Mugino as she held her palm towards the blonde St. Germain. "So basically, we just have to wear down their numbers without actually killing them, right? Well, Academy City's tech is pretty great; my body's proof enough of that. They can live a perfectly normal life even if I blow off a limb or three!!"

A brilliant beam of light surged out, but the blonde St. Germain only smiled a little.

She did not dodge with all her might or even shrink back.

She simply rotated the spear in her hand.

The beam had definitely hit, but…

"What!?"

"Is it really that strange?" asked St. Germain with a smile. "This was an attack I had already seen."

She had caught it near the top of her Chambord and she had done so as easily as catching a white ball thrown by a pitching machine.

"What you have been calling spears are no more than the roots of the Chambord. That name comes from the laboratory I once used. Simply put, it provides all of the tools I need to pursue my research themes. You could say it is a vanguard that takes water and nutrients from others, but you could also call it the fragile fingertips that have difficulty maintaining themselves when not protected within the earth."

She drew a ring of light by rotating the spear whose point was heated to orange.

"But unfortunately for you, the roots can grow stronger by twining together. Not to mention the branches and trunk which are always exposed to the external air and external enemies. Their durability is literally orders of magnitude greater."

"Roots?"

In his Power Lifter, Hamazura thought on that unpleasant ring of that word.

Aneri recorded each individual term and drew connections with red lines.

“Branches and a trunk, too? What on earth are you talking about?”

“One could say controlling diamonds, carbon, and organic matter is nothing more than a metaphor for life.”

The ring of light lost its axis and transformed into something like the numeral 8 on its side or the symbol for infinity.

And the tip was pointed directly forward.

“Do you know the difference between plants and animals, you failure of a boy? There are a few notable traits, but the most well-known is the difference between the cell membrane and the cell wall. Plant cells are a single almighty cell that provides all the necessary life functions such as skin, skeleton, and blood vessels, but that has made it difficult for them to move under their own will. One can only laugh at the irony of fate, but at the same time, it leads to an interesting idea.”

A strange shivering sensation ran up Kinuhata’s spine.

“For example, what if plant cells were fully divided between different functions such as skin, skeleton, blood vessels, and muscles? And what if they were then reunified to stimulate optimization? Now, what kind of evolutionary tree would that produce? If you compare the animal cell membrane and the plant cell wall, the plant’s is undoubtedly stronger. A beast made of plant matter would be much stronger than one of animal matter, wouldn’t you think?”

They did not wait any longer.

Mugino Shizuri fired her #4 beams into the blonde St. Germain again and again.

However, there were no screams or cries.

The pillar directly next to St. Germain had swelled out unnaturally.

Something had shielded her.

The overflowing roar sounded just like pressure escaping a steam engine. The Dianoid’s floor shook as a massive insect slowly revealed its form. To the very top it was just below two meters tall, and it was over four meters long. Its overall silhouette resembled a scorpion with a thick arcing tail in the back.

But instead of legs, it had complexly intertwined tree roots; instead of a mouth, white flower petals with a hint of red; and instead of two giant pincers, the predatory pouches of a carnivorous plant.

It was a mixture of plant and animal, much like an orchid mantis.

The upper body of a man in a tailcoat grew from the tip of the large arced tail where a venomous stinger would normally be found. Needless to say, he was one of the many St. Germains. So in a way, this was essentially a bizarre version of Hamazura’s Power Lifter.

For an instant, Hamazura thought Aneri had undergone a serious error after succumbing to all the rigorous work he was putting it through.

But in reality, the creature’s estimated muscular strength was just that ridiculously high.

(What…?)

The flower scorpion glowed orange in places due to the heat of Meltdowner, but its silhouette remained intact and its countless legs scraped at the ground. The blonde St. Germain thrust forward her spear-shaped Chambord as if it were a conductor's baton.

"I will now reveal to you the secret laws ruling the trinity of organic matter, carbon, and life."

The four-meter flower scorpion charged forward like a shell, and the male St. Germain extending from the thick tail produced a deep sound as he swung his own body around.

"Oh."

An instinctual chill filled Hamazura's entire body.

He suppressed the urge to leave it all up to Aneri and he adjusted his grip on the joysticks.

"Ohhhh

It split and split and split.

“What the hell is this!?” shouted Kamijou.

It was like a matryoshka doll. The beast grew progressively smaller, and it now resembled a creepy octopus that attached upside down to the ceiling with tentacles made of ivy and roots.

And the male St. Germain spun his spear around as he dangled upside down from the creature.

A disturbing pulsation ran through the head… no, for an octopus it would be the body. Regardless, the round portion seemed to inflate like a balloon, and then small flowers opened all over it. It produced a sound like a carbonated beverage being opened.

As soon as Hamazura caught a whiff of the odor slowly descending from above, his face grew pale. This was the grim reaper that anyone who worked on motor vehicles or other combustion-based machines were all too familiar with.

Aneri’s compositional analysis provided evidence for his fears, so he shouted its name.

“That’s carbon monoxide!! Mugino, burn the air! If you don’t, we’re done for!!”

Beams of light shot in several directions at once.

That deadly gas was primarily produced by incomplete combustion; an intense oxidation reaction would convert it into relatively safe carbon dioxide. Aneri had colored the toxin red to visualize it, but that coloration was already vanishing.

The remains of the octopus had shriveled up like rotting fruit, and it must have completed its role because it fell down. The male St. Germain must have breathed in the toxin himself because he collapsed to the floor and did not move.

While their attention was on him, the blonde St. Germain rotated her spear a few times.

The transparent floor undulated.

A giant mossy green spider appeared, and a male St. Germain sank into its back as if it were a bed or sofa. A mantis was covered in tough tree bark like armor, and a young female St. Germain had its two scythe-like arms attached to her shoulders and dragged the rest of it like a cape. A giant rattlesnake was made from countless intertwined roots, and an elderly St. Germain vibrated in place of the rattle on the end of the tail.

The beasts were not completed beasts.

They were nothing more than beings that incorporated the great strength of plant matter. All of the St. Germains held similar Chambords which provided more brutal destruction than any venomous stinger or fang.

“Let me be clear about one fundamental fact.”

The blonde St. Germain smiled as she rested her Chambord on her shoulder.

She spread her other hand horizontally to indicate the other St. Germains standing alongside her.

“If you are to face ‘me’, then you must overcome the framework of the individual. After all your boasting, I hope you have enough fighting spirit to drive ‘me’ into overflow.”

At the same time, the countless St. Germains wearing plant matter armor attacked alongside the surrounding downpour of spears they had created.

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St. Germain's attacks had attained maximum intensity.

It was like refining oil or alcohol before igniting it. It was like a laser-shaped diamond cutter that fired artificial diamond dust at extremely high speed. It was like a dust explosion caused by a large amount of scattered carbon dust.

They would sometimes fire a downpour of spears, they would sometimes transform their plant matter beasts or move to a new one, and they would sometimes wrap roots and vines around themselves to produce enormous springs.

The blonde St. Germain jumped freely about, kicking off the pillars or ceiling, and Kamijou Touma remained on the floor, but they briefly collided head-on.

Her Chambord caught the boy's right hand and it was destroyed bit by bit as the outermost layers were stripped away like a Baumkuchen.

They glared at each other like warriors locking blades and they threw words at each other.

"Enough of your desperate tricks. You can't manipulate anyone anymore and you can't trick anyone with your lies!!"

"I wouldn't be so sure. All I have to do is ensure everything works out in the end. Taking Aihana Etsu out of the equation isn't all that much of a problem for me."

The blonde St. Germain smiled thinly.

Kamijou finally realized she was completely serious. She was prepared for battle as a con artist.

"I think you are the one that isn't fully aware of the situation. The gates of hell have already opened. The Magic Gods have already entered the real world. And do you know what they will desire first?"

"Magic *Gods*?"

"They are of course after you."

She forcibly swung her partially broken spear.

With a solid clang, some space opened up between them.

"Just as the sword desired a king and St. Germain desired Aihana Etsu, the Magic Gods long for the one known as Kamijou Touma. That is why they envied Othinus who could move about as she wished. Heh heh. Yes, that's right. That is why they envied her!! Not for using the name Gremlin, and not for twisting the real world as she saw fit! They were only angry that she was monopolizing the one known as Kamijou Touma!!"

"…"

"Before wondering about my credibility, you wondered how I knew about those hundreds of billions of hells you experienced, didn't you? Well, I understand. I am neither a magician nor a Magic God. But don't you

dare say that the category of St. Germain is somehow inferior to that of the Magic God. No matter how perfect and happy a world the Magic Gods try to create, I will always occur at some point, regardless of the possibilities or environment involved. I am a being that transcends causality and the phases."

Hamazura's Power Lifter mercilessly charged toward the blonde St. Germain from behind.

But before the steel fist could reach her, a green spider rushed in from the side, pressed the Power Lifter to the ground, and caused it to slide like a passenger plane in an emergency landing.

Kamijou gave a shout directly below the donut-shaped gravity bomb.

"St. Germain doesn't exist. Those supposed Magic Gods are a product of fiction!"

"*That is how it has turned out, yes.*" A hint of stickiness filled her smile. "But surely you have noticed, boy. When discussing the truth of the world, the 'real' history that everyone accepts as normal is completely groundless. Did you find Othinus when investigating the legends of Odin? How do you link a muscular male god with that girl!?"

"…"

"You say you heard it from someone or saw it written somewhere. But what meaning is any of that when speaking of St. Germain? Especially when everything you see before your eyes is the truth."

His understanding was shaken.

Everything he thought was true had been knocked loose by nothing but words.

"I am St. Germain. I am the third category that easily separated itself from the mere magicians yet refused to join the worn-out Magic Gods. I can only be described with the term 'St. Germain'. Why can't you grasp that simple fact?"

Just like someone losing depth perception in a pure-white field of snow, Kamijou Touma's mind was thrown into an informational whiteout.

And then he spoke.

"*Is that more of your roleplaying?*"

The blonde St. Germain's illusionist's smile froze, just like cracks entering a jewel.

"I thought it was strange," spat out Kamijou. "If all you wanted to do was trick Aihana Etsu into doing something wrong, there would be no point in sealing the Dianoid and trapping everyone inside. If your goal was blowing me away with the gravity bomb, you would have no reason to trick Aihana Etsu. And what's this about that golden shield he had? If you just wanted to fill him with hate and send him against me, you could've just given him a knife or a gun. You wouldn't need to make him believe in magic on such short notice, so a simpler weapon would have made it easier to get him moving. No matter where you look, your actions weren't logical."

"…"

"At first, it all looks like you have some grand master plan, *but there wasn't a plan at all*. That's the true form of St. Germain. Whether it's a grudge you've held for ten years, a plan you've been working on for twenty, or a goal you've sought for thirty, you just make it up in five seconds and then overwrite your own memories. Of course the plans, thought processes, and morality of someone like that would be an inconsistent mess. You can't keep just one thing up for long."

That made it impossible to argue against St. Germain on terms of good and evil.

Even if he had killed someone for money, he would claim to have been killing his father's murderer as soon as someone questioned him about it. And if anyone accused him of wrongdoing during his sob story, he would make them out to be a corrupt cop or a bribed judge before mercilessly slaughtering them. In the very end, his actions would be the just ones.

"When you first attacked, you claimed you didn't have time to deal with me since you'd found Aihana, but that wasn't the truth. You were scared of Index's 103,000 grimoires and Othinus's experiences as a real Magic God. You were scared of carelessly showing yourself in front of people who knew how this world really works! That one chance meeting would reveal all of your lies and place all the blame back on you!!"

That was how he had gotten by.

After piling up so many excuses and indulgences within himself, he had run out and needed to compare himself to a Magic God. That was how great a magician he was.

"You aren't a Magic God. But St. Germain? A third category? We're not talking about beer here. New definitions don't just pop up like that! You're nothing but a normal magician. You're just like all the others I've seen before. But you were afraid of being called that, weren't you!?"

That brought up another issue.

A very fundamental issue.

"*Are you really St. Germain?*"

"…"

"*Or are you someone else who found it easier to use that name!?*"

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

St. Germain gave a wide grin and a few beads of sweat appeared on her small forehead.

"Needless to say, I am the time traveler known as St. Germain who traversed 1500 years in search of a king to serve and who never seemed to have enough money to keep up with those filthy nobles, so I used my words to get by when necessary and weren't they the inefficient ones for maintaining those wasteful and extravagant customs and it was not my fault in any way because I did the very best I could for this world and I would assume you don't want the world to be overrun by Magic Gods when you know firsthand just how much of a threat they are and you know that something has to be done if not just one but multiple have been released into this world and since I have the power to, I must do something about it and you are the one they are after and are certainly built into their plans, so destroying you now would force them to correct their plans and it is a shame we cannot just talk this out, but you simply refuse to understand my perfectly logical explanation and it is all your fault for not understanding, so it is you that is the problem here and not me, so there is nothing I need to worry about – simply nothing at all – and now that I understand that, I can relax and- Defrag complete: Report #1006632901."

Kamijou Touma slowly narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

He knew she had overwritten everything in just five seconds, but that was exactly why he said what he said.

"You poor thing."

The blonde St. Germain bit into the corner of her lip with her canine tooth, and she swung her Chambord horizontally even though it was broken.

One hundred spears appeared from the wall behind her and rushed toward Kamijou.

However, Hamazura used the Power Lifter's legs to kick the green spider up into their path. The flying spider acted as a shield and was skewered in midair. The St. Germain embedded in the spider's back frantically separated and escaped.

Despite the repeated sounds of destruction, Kamijou continued speaking.

"But it *isn't* because you're an inconsistent mess with nothing of your own that I feel sorry for you."

"Kh."

"You may be able to fabricate your morality and slip into a century of history in only five seconds, and you may be able to continue overwriting and overwriting until an optimum history has been built up in your head." He seemed to throw his words at her. "But even after all that, you still can't escape yourself. That's why I feel sorry for you. After all, every magician has a beginning. You begin with some reality you can't bear to accept, so you vow to overturn it, carve your magic name into your heart, and then become a magician, right? Then there has to be a beginning to your lies. No matter how easily you can lie or how comfortably you can make your way through this world, you can't escape the initial event that made you want to start acting. So none of this works as an indulgence for you. You may be able to deceive everyone else, but you can never deceive yourself."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Yes. That's all I can say here."

This whole time, Kamijou only spoke from his enemy's point of view.

"Now it's your turn to speak. But not to me. Speak to your own heart, you damn con artist."

Immediately afterwards, their clash resumed.

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"Cut the line!"

That shout of anger continually filled TV Orbit's production office on the Dianoid's mid level.

"Physically sever the cable if you have to. Just keep us from broadcasting. Hurry!!"

Needless to say, the greatest fear when a TV station was taken over was not the destruction of the broadcast equipment. It was having that equipment used for nefarious purposes.

A TV station or any part of the mass media could lead to deaths if misused. It had only been an accident, but when an American radio station had read a news-style drama about the arrival of aliens, it had led to a nationwide panic that included shootings. If an accident could do that much, just how much chaos could intentionally inaccurate information cause? In the worst case, it would be based on pre-existing feelings of discrimination.

The lack of mass production for and high-specs of editing and broadcasting equipment worked together to make them often cost hundreds of millions of yen, but people's lives were more valuable. And that was not just a nice thing to say. If they were sued, the reparations and drop in the corporation's public image would literally make the human lives more expensive to lose.

They had already had an intruder and a container had gone missing, so anything was possible that day.

But the people in the station were most afraid of someone spreading false information that would cause large-scale riots throughout Academy City.

They certainly never imagined it would lead to "this".

A single footstep rang coldly behind them.

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The number of St. Germains below the donut-shaped gravity bomb was reducing bit by bit.

The surprising leader in takedowns was not Mugino Shizuri or Kinuhata Saiai. It was Stephanie. While the powerful espers had their hands full holding back the spears and plant matter beasts, Stephanie was free to fire on the St. Germains with her PDW.

Her PDW did not use bullets fired by gunpowder. Instead, it used compressed gas to fire mock bullets made of tungsten steel.

Within twenty to thirty meters, it was destructive enough to fill a flesh-and-blood body with holes, so it was about as dangerous as a real gun indoors. Still, there were a number of ways to reduce the damage done.

For example, she could fire through clothing or stacks of paper.

For example, she could ricochet the bullets off of the walls or ceiling.

Quick bursts of gunshots rang out and the St. Germains were struck on the side of the jaw or temple to forcibly shake their skulls. With some slight blood loss, they collapsed from a concussion.

"Tch. The adult's stealing all the good parts!"

"What even is that? Super point-blank sniping? What kind of genre is that!?"

St. Germain used a variety of attacks using carbon: the countless spears, the armor of plant matter animals, and carbon monoxide spray. But the most dangerous part was the multiple chains of attacks from different angles and used with time delays. Each time one of them was defeated, their attack pattern would change.

The group moving toward Mugino and Kinuhata was still relatively thin.

Stephanie was of course the same as she freely moved about.

The most dangerous area was around the pointy-haired boy with only his right fist to work with and Hamazura Shiage who wore his Power Lifter.

There was no real reason to provide covering fire, but the more St. Germains they took out, the less of a threat they were overall.

And whether they were controlled or not, Academy City's #4 was not about to choose her own death just because she could not absolutely guarantee the survival of the hostages.

But something moved in the way just as Mugino Shizuri held out her palm.

It was not any of the St. Germains or the plant matter beasts that looked like giant orchid mantises.

Hamazura himself moved in and out of her line of fire.

"What a pain. Maybe I should just shoot him too."

"Wait, Mugino, wait," calmly cut in Takitsubo Rikou.

"…!?"

A moment later, Mugino felt a bizarre tremble run up her spine.

She turned around in surprise, but the girl in the pink track suit was staring vacantly into space.

(What was that? Did I almost lose control?)

"Wait!! What's that super blank look for!? Is this the usual pattern where you make me do all the work but take credit as a team!? That's super cruel!!"

When Kinuhata Saiai snapped at her, Mugino got back to fighting.

The two of them forcibly stopped the St. Germains from moving and Stephanie knocked them out with accurate gunshots.

This demon had taken over the Dianoid, but they had a way to drag him down to a manageable level.

"I super don't know how many St. Germains there are in the building, but whittling down their numbers would be best! So let's take them all out!!"

"If we can safely take a few samples, the others back there will figure out what's at the root of it all, right? Then let's not push ourselves. We only have to hold them in place long enough to have them knocked out."

Mugino was talking about Index and Othinus who waited behind them.

They had pulled back one of the concussed St. Germains and were checking over the body and peering into the pupils.

"Touma said something ridiculous about using the reverse of the process that original grimoires use to infect people's minds, but…"

"Yeah. For using a name like St. Germain, the method sticks to the basics. It looks like an acting trance is used to overwrite the contents. He views himself as the carbon forming a diamond, so it was necessary to purify his existence while creating the stable crystal. It's pretty logical."

When a group attempted to contact the dead, it was commonly said they could not include anyone with doubt in their heart. That often led people to view those techniques as scams, but there was a logical reason for it.

By wearing the same "uniform", eating the same foods, and going to a set location at a set date and time – especially an underground crypt or deep in the woods – they would create a small world cut off from the

outside world. Creating a group dyed in unique colors was a way of bending the common knowledge of that small, isolated society.

If one placed a single drop of ink into the sea, it would be quickly diluted, but things were very different when it was placed inside a single cup of water.

To complete a ritual, cabal magicians had techniques of instantly filling themselves with the appropriate thoughts. They had ways of twisting their own beliefs and principles in only a few days like turning a dial to match the angel they were summoning, the phenomenon they were producing, the time and date, or the positions of the stars.

Ultimately, they would fully purify their own beings so they could synchronize and parallelize.

St. Germain's legend had that tendency in the first place.

He was called unfathomable and no one knew what he truly thought, but he had appeared in the parties and gatherings of royals and nobles which were cut off from normal society. And there, he had used his understanding of the hopes and desires running rampant there to dye himself in their colors. After doing so, he would make thorough use of them. Immortality, time travel, ancient knowledge, and buried treasure were all things that powerful people with too much spare time would leap at.

And eventually, their positions would reverse.

Instead of dying himself in their colors, the royals and nobles' fascination with the legend of St. Germain would be dyed in his colors. They would use massive amounts of money to obtain St. Germain who knew everything and that would place serious pressure on their city or country. At that point, there were no leading roles, minor roles, actors, or audiences. Just as the matter drawn to the nucleus of the crystal was not fundamentally different from that nucleus, they became a single massive crystal known as St. Germain. It was a mad theatre.

In which case…

"He didn't even have to use the toxins of an original grimoire. When magicians start feeling unwell in the middle of a large-scale ceremony, there's a 'resuscitation' technique used to quickly remove them. He just used that as-is."

"Well, it's really nothing but acting, so the roots aren't that deep. How about we get started and use this opening to crush the entire St. Germain network? Since he sees himself as a diamond, there must be a controller or settings file as the 0.1% impurity lurking below the other 99.9%, but that may show itself once we shake him hard enough."

One of them was an expert in everything up to becoming a Magic God due to the 103,000 grimoires stored in her head.

The other was an expert in everything after becoming a Magic God due to being the only member of humanity to observe such things.

Together, it would be harder to find something their treasure trove of knowledge did not cover. If they used that knowledge to its fullest, there was no way they could not construct the virus of information needed to release these people from St. Germain's control.

Mugino, Kinuhata, and Stephanie were holding back most of them, so there was no chance of defeat now.

"…?"

But then Takitsubo Rikou suddenly raised her head.

The Dianoid's lowest level was a flat surface covered in evenly spaced pillars, but those pillars contained flat-screen monitors. They may have been meant to monitor the artificial gravity control device instead of being purely decorative.

Regardless, those monitors were displaying some strange information.

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"This isn't over yet."

The blonde St. Germain spoke to Kamijou with her mouth split wide in a smile.

"I am not done yet, boy."

"No, you're just about at your limit. You aren't even looking at your true enemy, so you never had a chance of winning!"

"I am not talking about willpower or fighting spirit. Do not underestimate the third category of St. Germain."

She snapped her fingers and the many flat-screen monitors attached to the pillars activated.

"Have you forgotten? I sealed the Dianoid and trapped countless people inside."

"You don't mean…"

"And St. Germain synchronizes, infects, and spreads. As long as I can provide the crystalizing stimulus, I can spread without end, just like electricity in high concentration saline. And wouldn't you know it, the Dianoid's mid level contains an entire TV station!"

"You don't mean…!!"

Deafening static assaulted their ears. Image after image danced across the screen, too quickly to follow: discontinuous scenery, a page of an ancient document, a strange graph, a realistic three-view drawing of a skull, etc. Overall, it looked like a bizarre sort of flashing art.

Aneri tried to analyze the pattern but quickly produced an error.

Hamazura groaned while operating the Power Lifter relatively close to Kamijou.

"What… what the hell is that!? Don't tell me that weird footage is playing throughout the entire building! And please don't tell me everyone who sees it will turn into a St. Germain!"

"*Why do you think it would be contained on such a small scale?*" replied St. Germain with a laugh. "Didn't I tell you? *The Dianoid contains an entire TV station.*"

Without thinking, Hamazura Shiage completely forgot about the extreme battle surrounding him and he naturally looked to the side. He could not see outside because the Dianoid's lowest level was deep underground and not even Aneri could gather that much information with the Power Lifter's sensors, but he had to have been picturing the endless expanse of the nighttime city.

What was happening in Academy City?

What world would they find once they set foot outside of the sealed Dianoid?

This one action nearly broke Hamazura's spirit, but Kamijou Touma remained facing the blonde St. Germain.

"No. Is this just another of those school plays you love so much?"

"…"

"If you could put a video online to synchronize, parallelize, crystalize, and grow without end, you would have already created a single crystal out of the entire world's population. You wouldn't be a third category or whatever; you'd be a crystal known as humankind. You may need to imprint information like that, but that isn't the full story. There has to be some kind of decisive trigger at the end."

Kamijou Touma continued speaking.

"Hey, St. Germain. Why did you just lie? Enough with the terrible lines that set your teeth on edge. To you, lying is a weapon and acting is a shield. You must have had a reason for it. How about I delve a little deeper? *You're starting to panic,* aren't you? Are we actually approaching checkmate here? That's why you decided you needed to turn things around with your words and destroy our rhythm."

"……"

The blonde St. Germain smiled quietly.

And as she smiled, an unpleasant sweat poured from her face. Veins that looked on the verge of bursting bulged out across her otherwise perfect face.

"Oh, I know."

Kamijou's words did not stop.

At this moment, he was more talkative than the specialist who had continually deceived royals and nobles with countless lies.

"How about this?"

He slowly extended his hand and pointed at something right in front of him.

It was time for the decisive answer.

"The pills. St. Germain is always taking pills."

But this voice came from directly behind him.

It came from Kanou Shinka who had been driven out of St. Germain's focus until now.

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St. Germain controlled carbon.

That was true on the micro level and the macro level.

In that case, his specialty could not be imprinting information in people's minds. The method had to use carbon.

For example, the black pills inside the pill case.

At the very center of his mysterious legends was the fact that he never ate any normal food and had lived for hundreds of years on only his secret medicine, wheat, and water.

What if that medicine was actually a certain microbe dried by the thousands or tens of thousands?

When dried, their life functions were mostly stopped and they could remain alive in that state for years. As soon as they absorbed a liquid such as saliva, they would resume functioning and invade the body of the human who had ingested them.

That was the less than 0.1% impurity in the 99.9% pure crystal.

It was not the nucleus or the terminal; it was a complete outsider. And just as with colored diamonds, it functioned as a controller to rearrange the properties of the entire crystal.

Someone knowledgeable of such things might think of Last Order's position in the Misaka Network or Fremea Seivelun's position in the Agitate Halation Project.

But if all of the St. Germains who repeatedly spread like an ever-growing crystal always needed the pills, then that alone would restrict them. And a diamond's impurity had to remain at less than 0.1%. If it took in too much, it would cause a defect in the crystalline structure.

So that impurity was the most unstable portion of the structure.

Whether it was a new member, a weary member, or a member that had been worked loose from the crystal and lost control, the settings file worked to stabilize the errors.

What if microbes like that were the trigger?

What if they could be cultivated in water and wheat and they could infect the human body?

What would that make St. Germain who had been whispered of for well over one thousand years?

Was he a literal…

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A dignified song filled the room.

It came from Index who had her hands folded as she knelt next to a collapsed St. Germain.

St. Germain's crystallization worked by purifying people's thoughts using the personality changing technique of an acting trance. This impromptu incantation would remove that and call back the original personality.

This was not magic. It was a more fundamental technique.

It used no magic power and was technically not a supernatural ability.

So when it seemed like St. Germain's thoughts were leaking out, it was only an illusion. It was nothing more than words mechanically spilling from the supposedly unconscious St. Germain as if he were trying to fight something.

It was much like he was suffering from a nightmare of old wounds.

"…———……"

To normal ears, it may have sounded like static, but to anyone with the proper knowledge, that scream of memories was enough to imagine the original sound. It was much like a needle running across the inscribed surface of a record.

And it brought several formulae to Index's mind.

(Is this how it works? The pills, the secrets of life, and the identity of what made St. Germain into St. Germain.)

It was more than just a voice.

The collapsed St. Germain's fingertips moved slightly. An index finger tapped out a simple signal of zeroes and ones and a fingertip slid along the floor to form writing. Index added them all into her mental framework.

What she discovered was a dreadful truth.

(This didn't come about naturally. Those pills and those creatures were manufactured?)

But by who?

Microbes could not shake the flask used to cultivate them.

Just like using bread to grow mold, someone had used water and wheat to prepare the optimum environment to produce them.

(Who could it have been?)

Index began to mentally reach out her hand.

There was a door there.

She reached toward the veil of secrecy that led to an ancient world.

(Or is that itself part of-…)

"Don't be fooled."

A voice dragged her mind back to reality.

It had come from fifteen centimeter Othinus.

"*That doesn't exist.* Making you think 'could it be' or 'is it possible' is how this con artist works. It seems impossible by any normal standards, but it would be fascinating if it were true. St. Germain doesn't use credibility to fool people. He uses curiosity. So there isn't actually anything there. All that really exists is the boring reality before your eyes."

Besides, their goal was not to perform a full investigation.

This was a side road, a meaningless digression. They needed to return to the task at hand without being led astray.

To resolve everything, they had to erase it all, including the claw marks hidden in the deepest depths.

X X X X

The blonde St. Germain's back straightened unnaturally and twitched like she had been hit by a stun gun.

Nothing had happened to her on the outside.

This was coming from the internal structure of the St. Germain framework.

Someone was working to delete them all plus the network itself.

And they had been fully caught by that attempt.

She would be eliminated in just a few more minutes, as would all the others. Every St. Germain alive in this time period would vanish.

"Gah…kah…!!!???"

Even as her shout and gasp caught in her throat, she produced a new spear from the floor and grabbed the Chambord in one hand.

The surrounding walls and floor groaned as plant matter creatures grew from them.

Even the blonde St. Germain was attempting to don a monster which had giant blooming flower petals instead of a mane.

She was preparing to slaughter her enemy.

And that enemy's name was…

"You made one mistake," said Kamijou Touma.

With a great bursting sound, his right fist stopped the lion his opponent was trying to wear.

And that was all it took for the beast to crumble.

"It wasn't that you didn't make it to the gravity bomb in time, it wasn't that you failed to control Aihana Etsu, it wasn't that you didn't drive us away from here, and it wasn't that your lies weren't enough to deceive yourself."

He opened his fist and pointed straight forward.

But he was not pointing at the blonde St. Germain.

He pointed at the person beyond her who truly stood in the leading role.

"*You mistook the name of your enemy!! Your true enemy was by your side from the very beginning!!*"

"Gaaa

Epilogue: End of the Extremely Passionate Quickening — CRAZY_1st_cry.

Still in his Power Lifter, Hamazura Shiage stood on a narrow catwalk running across the wall of the Dianoid's lowest level.

He had a simple reason for this.

"Oh, crap. This weird donut is trouble! It's making all sorts of weird squeaking sounds!! Was it placed under too much stress!?"

But Kinuhata Saiai and Mugino Shizuri were carefree as they looked up at him from the floor with their hands on their hips.

"Washing machines are still doing super fine when they make that noise."

"This isn't a washing machine!! It's a graviton-style artificial gravity control device! If it blows, the entire planet will be crushed to the size of a fist!!"

"Who cares. If it's a problem, I can just vaporize it with my Meltdowner."

"Again, it's not a washing machine!! Not to mention that it supports a seventy story building! If it stops working all of a sudden, the whole building could topple right over!!"

"Oh."

"Then should we get out of here super soon?"

She sounded as super casual as someone suggesting to buy mayonnaise now since the price would increase the following month.

"Eh? Wait. What about me?" asked Hamazura.

"C'mon, Hamazura. That donut on the ceiling is spraying steam everywhere. Can't you super do something about it?"

"Like what!?"

"How should I know? Try grabbing the joint on the hose."

"It's not a leaky washing machine! There's no way that's enough to fix it!!"

Hamazura complained, but he had no other ideas on how to fix it. In the end, he was forced to display his stupidity by trying to hold in the strange steam (if that was even what it was). The Power Lifter's giant hands proved useful there.

Meanwhile, Mugino and Kinuhata made a quick escape of the lowest level. They started by walking toward the door leading to the stairs.

"This has been an awful day."

“You don’t believe in the superstition that people have a uniform amount of luck, do you? It all comes down to probability, so we can’t even view this as a sign that some super good luck is coming our way soon.”

“Wait! Waaaaaiiiiiiitttttt!!”

Hamazura shouted after the two girls, but they had already vanished.

Left alone, he we forced to babysit the giant donut that could burst at any moment.

But even if god had abandoned Academy City, it seemed some invisible something – be it blood type horoscopes or big data investment theory – was still looking after the place.

After all that extreme misfortune, something arrived to make up for it.

“Hamazura.”

“Takitsubo-shan?”

“Why is your face covered in tears and snot?”

A girl in a pink track suit had climbed the ladder to reach the catwalk and she walked up next to his giant Power Lifter.

“The entrances on the surface have been opened and Anti-Skill should be here soon.”

“Yes, it would certainly be a pretty big problem if I couldn’t at least hope for that much!!”

“Hamazura, why do you sound so effeminate?”

Takitsubo gently moved up next to him.

There was no real reason for it.

They were in a position where they could lean up against each other without needing an excuse or purpose behind it.

Or at least, they had been.

A moment later, Hamazura skillfully swung his entire body around to avoid the track suit girl while still holding onto the joint of the hose extending from the donut.

With the expected support gone, Takitsubo Rikou stumbled and her expression grew utterly blank.

She spoke to her boyfriend with a bland voice that was as frightening as grinding gravel.

“Hama-…?”

“No, wait. That wasn’t me. I didn’t do that! What’s even happening here? Oh, wait. Don’t tell me it was Aneri!”

“Who’s Aneri?”

“Wait, Takitsubo. Don’t you think you’re taking it a bit too far to be jealous of an assistance program!? Wait, wait. I’ll explain. I’ll explain it all from the beginning! And Aneri, stop trying to trip Takitsubo!!”

The surface looked like a dam had burst.

The Dianoid's entrances and exits had opened upon St. Germain's defeat, so all the boys and girls trapped inside had frantically rushed out.

"Wah, wah!"

One small boy was dragged along among them.

It was Aihana Etsu. No, it was Kanou Shinka who had used that name.

He too had been released from St. Germain's bonds and had returned the aboveground floors. That was where he had been swallowed up by the human waves.

But then a hand grabbed his.

"Are you okay?"

It was Kamijou Touma.

The next thing they knew, they had been tossed out into the night of District 15.

The pointy-haired boy looked over his shoulder and gave the crowds an annoyed look.

"Looks like meeting up with the others is going to be difficult. I should probably wait for things to calm down and then call them."

"Um…"

"Oh, the gravity bomb? Hamazura and that Stephanie person will take care of that. Everyone was released from the Dianoid and a proper team from Anti-Skill will be here to take over soon. There's nothing you have to worry about."

"No, uh, not that."

"Oh, right. If you're leaving, I'd suggest doing so now. I'm going to go talk with Anti-Skill to explain the situation, but what about you? Would you rather not speak with them?"

Kamijou waved a hand dismissively as he spoke, but Kanou Shinka shook his head.

"I'll go too. I caused a lot of trouble for a lot of people, but I didn't do anything I need to hide."

"Is that so?" Kamijou's expression softened a bit. "But I see you're not speaking as assertively anymore."

"That was just the blood rushing to my head. Your personality doesn't change that easily."

"Yeah, maybe not."

People grew, but the root of their being might not change quite so easily.

Kanou Shinka would likely remain a crybaby, but he had gained the strength he needed to hold in the unnecessary tears and continue facing forward.

That was the small change he had undergone.

He had grown while retaining the part of him his old friend had liked so much.

It had been a meaningful experience.

After all…

“Frenda definitely existed,” sighed Kanou Shinka. “It’s too late now and there’s no way to save her, but I found the truth about her. And I’m satisfied with that.”

Accepting a difficult truth without averting your gaze may have taken a sort of strength. At the very least, he was no longer the boy who had only been able to keep his trembling legs moving by narrowing his field of vision.

“Hey.”

It sounded less like he had just realized something and more like he was asking something he had been wondering about.

“Why did you hand it over to me?”

“Hm?”

“At the end there. I may have been the one to provide the finishing blow on St. Germain, but…well…it didn’t have to be that way. I’m sure you could have defeated St. Germain on your own. So why didn’t you?”

Kamijou gave a sudden smile as if the question had caught him off guard.

And he went on to give his answer.

“What are you talking about? The hero here was you, Kanou Shinka.”

He did not need a Level 5 power. He did not need the title of Academy City’s #6.

He did not need a boost from the legend of a shield said to belong to the nonexistent Queen Anne.

He was just a boy and that was all the qualifications he needed to save the world.

2.3 million people lived in Academy City and countless joys and sorrows occurred there every day. No one who lived there could claim to live a perfectly happy life.

If one paid just a little attention as they looked around, that would be abundantly clear.

A small form was curled up and shedding tears.

They produced suppressed weeping and sobbing.

It came from the kind of student dorm room found anywhere in the city.

The tears belonged to a middle school girl. Her room’s lights were off, she had a blanket thrown over her head, and she was trembling. The reason for all this was clear.

It was an entirely different story from this one.

Every three days, a secret death game was played.

She had followed the hellish rules given by the Game Master and overcome countless games. Sometimes she had been alone and sometimes she had worked with other players, but there was nothing going on. A lot of her friends had lost during the previous game and the players who lost were disposed of when the next game began.

She had to stop it, but she had no way of doing so.

She could only keep fighting according to the Game Master's rules and leaving that framework was simply impossible.

Time was running out.

If she let it begin, her friends would lose their lives and, once she was completely isolated, everyone else in the game would work against her and she would lose too.

There was nothing she could do.

Even with her esper power, academic ability, money, family connections, physical strength, qualifications, and everything else that made up her personality, she could not find any way of escaping this situation.

And that was when her doorbell rang late at night.

"…?"

Her shoulders jumped in surprise, but that was all.

A minute, five minutes, and then ten minutes passed, but nothing else happened.

She slowly turned toward the front door and eventually stood up. Still holding the blanket, she approached the door. She saw no one through the peephole, so she cracked the door open with the chain still in place.

When she found no one, she tilted her head with emotionless eyes.

That was when she noticed something inside the newspaper box attached to the door. It was an A4-size envelope. Fearing it was rigged with a razor blade, she gingerly picked it up and opened it, but it had not been tampered with in any way.

As she glanced through the many pages of difficult documents, she frowned.

It was a collection of personal information.

It also contained a message telling her she could change her identity by cutting and pasting the relevant portions.

When she turned the envelope upside down and shook, a laminated card fell out. Her trembling lips spoke aloud the name she saw there.

"Academy City's #6? Aihana…Etsu?"

Meanwhile, a delinquent boy gave a report over his cellphone while nimbly slipping through the security sensors and escaping onto the night road.

“Ahh, ahh! I transferred ‘Aihana Etsu’ elsewhere, just like you wanted. Honestly, this is stupid. You have the power of the #6, so surely you could save them directly instead of going to all this trouble. Do you just love looking down on them like this?”

“…”

“It’s meaningless unless they solve their problems themselves? That’s what I’m saying is ‘looking down on them’, you elite! Not that I’m one to talk when I’m helping some intellectual with their hobby. This really isn’t a job for Yokosuka the Organ Crusher, you know?”

“…”

“Oh, shut up and go straight to hell. I thought if I worked with someone above the #7 I’d be able to find a way to deal with that annoying guts guy, but all I’m doing is physical labor for 700 yen an hour. So what’s next? Lie in wait to help them escape when their amateurish act falls apart? Wait just a damn second. I’m not some kind of hero! To hell with that!! I’ll still do it, though!!”

The delinquent boy gave an especially displeased click of the tongue and ended the call.

He briefly turned back toward the student dorm and spoke.

“Welcome to the underside of the world, ‘Aihana Etsu’ #...oh, I’ve lost count.”

“Hm.”

In a park not far from the Dianoid, a mummy-like Magic God used a gold sword as a cane and spoke in a dry, cracking voice.

He was the High Priest.

The branch-like fingers extending from his robe slowly opened and closed.

“I’m glad to see St. Germain was safely defeated. He was much like a virus that always appeared somewhere no matter what kind of phase was added or how golden a world was created. And there was no talking it out with him thanks to that self-made hatred of his. We could have directly interfered, but we are far too powerful for that. It would defeat the purpose if we destroyed the world in the process.”

“Yes, but it’s over now,” whispered a beautiful women with brown skin and silver hair.

She was Nephthys whose body was covered in white bandages.

“The Voodoo Zombie did an excellent job. I’m sure of it now that I’ve walked around the area a bit. The spell has adapted to our bodies, so now we can move through the world without breaking it.”

“Nee hee hee. Splitting up our power like opposing mirrors, huh?”

Niang-Niang laughed like a mischievous child. She wore a short white China dress and had a distinctive charm attached to her forehead which she poked at with her index finger.

“By infinitely dividing our infinite power, we’ve kept ourselves at a level just barely low enough for this world to contain. …But in a way, this is the worst possible transformation, don’t you think? You could just keep killing and killing us without end. Like a matryoshka doll or an onion, *you would have to fight a nearly eternal battle to completely kill us.*”

“There is no need to hold back. We are already full Magic Gods, so it would be unnatural to find any way for us to lose.”

“High Priest, this is why you can’t reach enlightenment. How long is it going to take you to realize that?”

At any rate, the Magic Gods had a technique of moving through the world, even if it was like treading on thin ice.

And that meant they were about to begin for real.

They were no longer leaving it up to the tendencies of others or allowing something else to bring about the conclusion.

This time, a group of true Magic Gods was on the move.

“I suppose Kamijou Touma comes first,” said the High Priest while gazing upon the starry sky. “Aleister may have laid claim to him and even Othinus has interfered, but it is not a bad idea. We will simply acquire what it is we need for our objective.”

“Old man, jealous men are just the worst, you know? This would be why you didn’t get any followers even after staying true to yourself to the point of mummification.”

Suddenly, static filled the nighttime park.

It came from a large speaker that announced the time during the day and provided disaster information during emergencies.

“Do you really think I will let you do that?” asked a familiar voice.

“Oh, is that you, Aleister? I’m glad to see you’re still alive and kicking. Sorry about the other day. I really shouldn’t have let *my anger get the better of me* at my age.”

That was all it took for him to kill.

Rather than follow an exaggerated plan or make careful preparations, he acted on the rocky waves of his emotions.

The High Priest’s words hinted at the joy he felt in tormenting the weak. And worst of all, that “unenlightened man” did not see any of the ugliness inside himself. His surface consciousness did not at all think he was rubbing salt in the wound. He truly believed he was showing his appreciation toward the person he confronted.

“Then again, we have managed to find our feet here. We might be causing some trouble in your backyard and it might not even still be a city once we’re done with it, but try to forgive us. After all, we have pretty short fuses.”

“Found your feet? Do you mean that spell that infinitely divides the infinite capacity of a Magic God to trick the world by eternally layering existences that are just barely small enough for the world to contain?”

“Word gets to you quickly. Anyway, this might be an excellent opportunity for you, Aleister. Our power is limited to what can be explained in this world, so this would be the best time to kill us.”

Even that line had the implied caveat of “but it is still essentially impossible”.

For one thing, no one existed who could kill a being that the world could only just barely contain. Whether a Magic God’s power was divided by a billion or a trillion, a mere magician was still not enough to kill them.

The Magic God’s existence was infinitely layered like a matryoshka doll or an onion. A Magic God was impossible kill in the first place, but one would have to kill them a trillion or a quadrillion times before they would cease to exist.

So effectively, no one could stop the High Priest, Nephthys, or Niang-Niang.

They could run rampant through the world and anyone who opposed them would be crushed underfoot.

The people could only curl up, tremble in fear, and wait for the disaster to pass. And if they happened to be along the Magic Gods’ path, they would be smashed to pieces for being so “unlucky”.

Needless to say, Academy City had already been thrown into that disaster.

However…

“It is true this might be the time to kill you.”

“…?”

As soon as the High Priest frowned, he felt a strange object pierce through his dried chest.

“Wha…t…!?”

He was shocked, but he was not the only one affected. Nephthys and Niang-Niang also grimaced with a hand on their chest.

“If you can predict what must be done and what must happen, you can prepare for the next move. To enter this world, the Magic Gods would need to use a common spell on their own bodies. …Did you really think I wouldn’t take advantage of that? It was the perfect chance to overwrite your internal structures with whatever new parameters I wanted.”

“…”

The High Priest fell silent for a moment, but…

“No, that would not be possible. All you ever achieved was the failure you call Aiwass. How could you possibly prepare a spell that would affect not just one completed Magic God but affect a group of them in the exact same way? And you would need information on us specifically before putting together the spell.”

“Oh, come on,” said Aleister with no hint of emotion in his voice. “Why do you think I challenged the Magic Gods alone when Othinus was defeated? Wait. Don’t tell me. Surely you didn’t *actually* think a ‘human’ such as myself could be enraged by a simple stain in a journal.”

“You…don’t mean…”

“I had to take the necessary parameters by force. That was all. It did get me laughed at by some people I know, though.”

That was why he had not cared that he had lost.

He had only needed steal the Magic Gods' parameters through direct contact and then make it back alive.

"I buried it inside you," said Aleister.

That "human's" cold voice seemed to challenge those gods of magic.

"What did I bury inside you, you ask? Tremble in fear, true Gremlin. There is great meaning in your doubt turning to impatience and then to fear. Listen, I no longer view you as a threat. You may have forgotten after living for so very long, but it is high time you gradually remembered what death feels like."

"No," denied the High Priest. "That is still impossible. The very foundation of your assertion is wrong. You claim to have prepared something powerful enough to defeat Magic Gods like us and you claim to have used this opportunity to inject it inside of us, but that would require swapping out Zombie's spell. Whether you had a spell or not, you would need to defeat Zombie, a Magic God, to replace her spell! That's no different from locking the key inside the vault. Your initial argument doesn't hold up!!"

"True."

Something heavy could be heard tearing through the wind.

The continuing fluctuation in the noise suggested it as slowly rotating as it flew. The Magic Gods reflexively turned toward the noise and they saw something fall from the distant night sky.

It landed right in the center of their group.

It was a cross forcibly made from intersecting steel beams.

It was wrapped in barbed wire and it resembled the magical rose symbol more than it did the original symbol of a monotheistic religion.

With a deafening roar and a cloud of dirt, the cross stabbed into the ground and it had something attached to it.

A human silhouette was nailed to the cross by countless tungsten steel spikes and it was tightly bound by barbed wire.

"Zom…bie?" muttered the High Priest when he saw the girl whose entire body was covered in stitches.

"I would prefer not to use such inelegant language," said Aleister.

He was supposed to be cold and unfeeling both above and below the surface, but a note of contempt seeped into his voice.

"But by any chance, were you taking me for a fool?"

"…"

Far away, a golden retriever narrowed his eyes slightly.

With its job complete, the sky-piercing electromagnetic ejection catapult folded up.

While a small metal arm allowed him to puff on a cigar, an indulgent memory came to mind.

It was of those original people, those people who were no longer with him.

He had no real grudge against anyone and he held no hostility toward magic.

It simply came down to his way of life.

It came down to how he would use the mind they had left him with.

“Now, then. I suppose I should get started.”

Sweet smoke escaped his canine mouth as he sighed.

The declaration of war was complete.

That meant it was time for war. A true conflict between science and magic was unavoidable.

“I should get started where they left off, even if it means relying on the foreign laws they so abhorred. And I can hold my head high as I do so because that kind of rule-breaking contradiction is what it means to be a Kihara.”

Focus on nothing but being a Kihara.

They had been unable to continue their efforts, but he would make sure what they had done was not wasted.

“Oh?”

In St. George’s Cathedral, Archbishop Laura Stuart, a woman whose folded blonde hair was 2.5 times as long as she was tall, spoke with no emotion evident in her voice.

“So he isn’t even trying to hide it anymore. I think he’s mocking me.”

A few pieces were laid out on a board.

They represented Academy City and the Magic Gods who would likely oppose the city now.

The Anglican Church was well known for its battles against magicians, but these would not be easy opponents even for them.

(Normally, I would wait until they had worn each other down and then make my move, but that would be meaningless if I can’t fully control both sides’ actions.)

She tapped her index finger on the board as she thought.

However, she was not worrying over the enemies she had already seen.

The most frightening ones were those whose role had yet to be decided.

Those were the forces that could do anything.

“Then again…”

With a quiet clack, she placed a new piece on the edge of the board. All of the other pieces were arranged according to some sort of system. They were dangerous, but she could predict what they would do. This new piece, however, was placed far from all the others and no one could ignore it.

This piece did not belong to Academy City, the Magic Gods, or the Anglican Church.

A certain boy's name came to mind as Laura toyed with the piece's head using her finger.

"What 'this' does may just determine what happens."

The next battle was beginning.

A few people claimed to fully understand the situation, but were they truly seeing everything on the board?

Not even that was certain as far-too-many people's fates were swallowed up by it all.

Afterword

If you bought each volume one by one, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

The theme this time was St. Germain!! He is pretty well-known as far as magic goes, but I had not touched on him yet because of his distance from the leaders of modern Western magic cabals like Mathers and Crowley and because doing any research will turn up as much material treating him like a con artist as material treating him like a mysterious individual.

But I wondered if I could mix both the pure and impure sides of him in this series and thus New Testament 12 was born.

The real themes were lies, acting, theatre, and roleplaying. For better or for worse, I think these are unavoidable factors in the occult. Not so much in pure religion or mythology, but definitely in the ritual magic organized by the same intellectuals that attended high society parties.

To accentuate this theme, I added a liar on the ally side, too. He was fully relying on that lie, but as he overcame a harsh reality, he grew enough to cast off that shell, stand on his own two feet, and announce his own name. And with that truth, he defeated St. Germain who wielded lies. That was the kind of story I wanted to tell.

People have various reasons to lie.

St. Germain did, Kanou Shinka did, and even Frenda did in her appearance from the past.

Each of those reasons approaches the true meaning of lying or acting. Take the lie Frenda told Kanou Shinka, for example. If you focus on why she did it rather than the words themselves, you might just realize that there are several different types of acting.

I kept the conclusion with St. Germain vague instead of giving a clear answer, but I do have a definite answer as the author. Was he(?) a rare sort of magician or was he just an incredible con artist? Make sure to give that some serious thought. Also, the Agitate Halation Project in New Testament 7 may look merciless at first glance, but you can also view this story as the answer to what kind of threat that project could have been a countermeasure to had it not been driven out of control by Yakumi Hisako.

As an experiment for this story, I kept Kamijou Touma in an assistance role.

That’s why he was beaten up by Hamazura Shiage and why he let Kanou Shinka have the finishing blow.

It may seem like nothing but bad news for him, but I think his “What are you talking about? The hero here was you” line in the epilogue shows how much he has grown from always insisting that he do it. What did you think?

I also focused on Frenda so that this novel would correspond with New Testament 1.

I wasn’t exactly hiding it, but when I created Frenda Seivelun in Old Testament 15, I asked Haimura-san to make her extremely cute so no one would immediately peg her as the character who would die. …But that

made her one of the most popular characters even among the massive number of characters in this series, so I could not help but realize this was the work of a true professional illustrator.

And so I have defined Frenda as a character that is neither good nor evil. That may be quite a rare position in this series. Since we generally see her working on the dark side, she may seem more weighted on the evil side, but I think she has a number of different sides to her that are all of equal weight. If you start wondering where exactly she wanted to return to so badly that she was willing to betray Mugino, Takitsubo, and Kinuhata in Old Testament 15, you might be able to imagine a side of Frenda that isn't pure evil.

Then again, I learned after the fact just how powerful a trait "a beautiful but dead girl" is. There really is a lot to learn about constructing characters.

Speaking of characters, I dug deeper into the character of Kihara Noukan this time. He seems to be a step above the other Kiharas, but his driving force of "focus on nothing but being a Kihara" is also Kihara Enshuu's primary ideology and his feelings for the originals are irrational and fantastical things that go beyond scientific formulas. Despite being at the core of the Kiharas, he also has one paw outside the realm of pure science. He walks through the darkness alongside Aleister who has mastered and yet hates magic. I hope you were able to think about the character of Kihara Noukan based on the various glimpses you had of him.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san and to my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anana-san. With the Dianoid, the Power Lifters, the many St. Germains, and the plant armor, there were a lot of difficult elements this time. I truly am grateful they put up with it all.

I also give my thanks to the readers. With the various Magic Gods, including Othinus, have you started to realize how Gremlin works yet? The setup is complete, so a full-scale clash with the Magic Gods will finally begin next time. I hope you will keep reading.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now

It's about time for Mikoto to have her turn in the spotlight, isn't it?

-Kamachi Kazuma